

AMAZING STORIES

SUMMER 1996 • NUMBER 593

Original Works from
Award-Winning
Authors

Orson Scott Card
Ben Bova

More Fiction by

A.C. Crispin

Neal Barrett, Jr.

James Alan Gardner

Commentary
by Bruce Sterling
Being
Amazing

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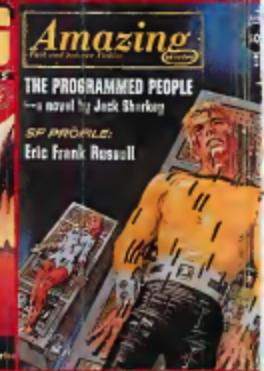
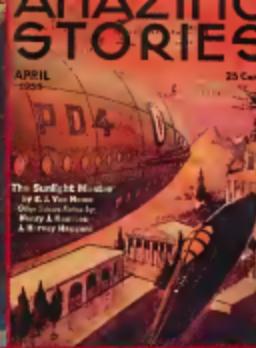
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Unbelievable—but True

IF SOMEBODY had written the story and sent it in to me, I'd have sent it right back.

Not plausible, I would say. Couldn't happen. Readers would never believe it.

The story starts three and a half years ago, when *AMAZING Stories* died. The company that owned the world's first science fiction magazine stopped publishing it, just a few years short of the turn of the millennium and the 75th anniversary of its first issue. Instead of continuing on to pass those milestones, *AMAZING Stories* was buried by the side of the road.

Then, two and a half years later, that same company was on its deathbed when a visitor from a distant land swooped down and changed everything. This visitor (sort of like the Borg, except benevolent) assimilated the dying company. It took many of the employees of that company and brought them into the body, while at the same time allowing them to keep their creative independence. The visitor, which goes by the accurately descriptive name Wizards of the Coast, performed one wondrous feat after another, bringing peace and security back into the careers of many people whose livelihoods had been threatened. Life was good again . . . and there the story could have stopped because, as happy endings go, that would have been a nice one.

But the benevolent Wizards weren't done. They saw that one more miracle remained to be worked, and with a final flourish they brought *AMAZING Stories* back to life.

Unbelievable as it seems even to the people who lived it, that story really happened, and the magazine you're holding is proof of that fact. Because of the energy and the resources of Wizards of the Coast, the first magazine ever to be devoted to science fiction is back doing what it does best.

If this is the first issue of *AMAZING Stories* you've ever seen, it's my pleasure to welcome you to the oldest and grandest magazine of its kind. If you used to read *AMAZING Stories* and have wondered where it's been...well, now you know. Welcome back, and I think you're going to like what the old magazine has become.

This inaugural issue of the resurrected magazine looks to the future at the same time it pays homage to the past—two qualities that, as it happens, are also integral to the best of science fiction. Wrapped in a classy, modern package are stories that will send you back, propel you forward, and maybe even turn you sideways. Here and there throughout the magazine—beginning with the montage of old covers just to the left of these words—you'll get some glimpses into where the *AMAZING Stories* of today has come from. This magazine has a long and colorful history, and we've decided to share some of it with you.

The next chapter in that long history begins right now. We're headed into the unknown, into the unpredictable, and I hope you'll join us on that journey.

It's great to be alive.

KIM MOHAN
Editor

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Dispatches

"Dispatches" is the department where we print letters you send to us. But because we can't very well print letters about a magazine none of you have seen until now, we filled the page for this issue with classic correspondence—observations and criticisms from readers of times gone by. The next time we print a "Dispatches" page, we hope your letter will be on it—let us know what you think of this issue by writing to Amazing Stories, P.O. Box 707, Renton WA 98057 or dropping us an electronic message at kmbabu@wizards.com.

To the Moon? Never!

Editor, Amazing Stories:

In your comment on a letter written by Alan F. Wiggin you said: "Personally, we do not believe that man will ever reach the moon." If that is your belief, it seems to me that you are encouraging a cause, and incidentally, making money by it, in which you have no faith, in other words—you are selling a product in which you have no faith. I believe that a great many of your readers as firmly believe in inter-planetary flight as a few men did in aeroplanes before the Wrights flew, even after a great scientist proved by mathematics that an aeroplane could not fly. I think that you owe it to your readers to justify your statement, and I am looking forward to what you have to say.

A. J. Steinnett
Lexington, Virginia

The writer of this letter certainly does not hesitate to say what he means. It was considered a very great achievement when a balloon was taken up to eleven miles above the sur-

that as regards going to the moon, we are in the same class that Professor Simon Newcombe occupied with regard to the behavior of air machines. There is a theory that the incredulity of practically everybody was an element that operated to produce the death of Professor Langley of the Smithsonian Institute who had done excellent work in the testing out of flying and soaring, and who was an eminent scientist, but could find no one to believe in his work on airplanes.

The reprint in the November issue was one of Edgar Allan Poe's best efforts. Do not let the discouraging views of the world at large about going to the moon affect your health.

—T. O'Connor Sloane, Ph.D., Editor
[FEBRUARY 1934]

To the Moon? Now!

Sirs,

My immediate reaction to Willie Ley's explanation of "What's Wrong with Rockets?" in your March issue is one of wonder mixed perhaps with a sense of shame. Says Ley, it appears there are not 30,000 persons on this planet at the present time sufficiently concerned with the assault on the infinite to contribute a mere \$3 a year to its realization. There are 30,000 readers of this magazine, surely. Well, what are they waiting for—the Martians to come to earth? Do you mean to tell me the majority is not thrilled by the possibilities of the conquest of space? Has not the "inter-planetary yarn" always been the most popular theme in science-fiction? Couldn't you and you and you do without a few packs of ciggies a year, cut down on a few football games or dances or make some small sacrifice to advance aeronautics, most sig-

wooderful thing if we science-fiction followers could bring about this dream? I deem it not only our privilege but our duty to participate. Let's make that moon trip come true...

Forrest J. Ackerman
Hollywood, California
[MAY 1940]

The letter of Forrest J. Ackerman, and the article by Mr. Ley on "Rockets," prompted this letter, as I, too, am interested in rockets. The sad part is I know very little about them and I do not have a million dollars or so to spend on them, but I do have a lot of ideas (some of them cracked). But I seem to recall that a certain stratosphere balloon flight was financed by selling what was left for bookmarks, and a trans-Atlantic flight raised a nice sum of money peddling ping pong balls. A few variations of the same basic idea could be used to finance rocket experiments.

However, I go Mr. Ackerman one better with my ambition. The headlines do not interest me; I want to set my own foot down on the moon before I die. (My wife thinks I'm nuts.)

Dan Willhite
[AUGUST 1940]

Dye, Edie, Dye

Sirs,

I have just finished reading the February issue of Amazing Stories and I especially enjoyed "Truth Is a Plague" by David Wright O'Brien. However, I did notice one thing in the story which was too amazing. On page 65, Edie is mentioned as a *Nude*; on page 66 she is smoothing her dark hair. Quite a transformation even for a bubble dancer, don't you think? Perhaps the truth gas did get into the apartment and change her hair to its true color.

Norman Keltner
Toronto, Canada

We've heard of these bubble dancers doing some quick-change stunts. Maybe this was one? Or maybe your editor ought to admit he slipped up on the proof-reading, eh? Sorry, old man, we'll try to be more careful in the future.—Ed.

[APRIL 1940]

I want to read those mile-high headlines: ROCKET REACHES MOON! before I die.

face of the earth, marking the highest point man has ever reached, and that was a very small fraction of the distance to the moon. It is perfectly true that work is being done on rocket propulsion and that is the only method known to us of propelling an object through a vacuum by self-contained force. We admit

nificant of sciences? How's about us of the great "imagi-nation" providing the catalyst (cash, to you) that'll speed up space-flight? Think of "Things to Come"! Personally, I want to read those mile-high headlines: ROCKET REACHES MOON! before I die. Wouldn't it be a



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It All Started by Being Amazing

THIS IS THE MAGAZINE THAT, IN APRIL 1926, LAUNCHED "SCIENTIFICTION" AS A GENRE.

The founder of *Amazing* drifted into publishing almost by accident. He happened into the pulp magazine industry because he was printing a parts catalog for his radio supply house. Hugo Gernsback was not a literary guy.

He was a high-tech entrepreneur, a classic self-made man in an exploding electronic media business.

Amazing Stories was Gernsback's boldest, best, and longest-lasting experiment. Though it happened to sell fiction, its true blood brother and stablemate was a Gernsback popular mechanics 'zine called *Science and Invention*. *Science and Invention* was all about the raw exhilaration of 20th-century technological progress. Gernsback created *Amazing Stories* to convey that thrill in story form. *Amazing* was the wonder of it all without the tech-specs, the thrill of futuristic astonishment for its own sweet sake.

Amazing was about kicking the doors of the future wide open. When Hugo himself wrote sci-entification, his work was a parts catalog. Open the cover, and out came a tumbling cornucopia of fantastic gizmos: fluorescent lighting, skywriting, plastics, jukeboxes, fertilizer, tape recorders, stainless steel, fiberglass—not to mention one of Gernsback's personal favorites, "Tele-Vision." It was all about amazing, transcendent 20th-century techno-power. The fantastic kick you got when you built a home crystal set, powered it up, twisted the dial for the first time, and heard human voices coming straight into your head through the ether.

A kid with a crystal set who read *Amazing Stories* was no longer merely a kid with a crystal set. He could count himself as an ancestor of Ralph124C41+, the elite super-expert, the

techno-lord of the ivory tower. The boy's fascination with radio dials and push-buttons assumed a new, mythic dimension. He wasn't merely buying diodes and vacuum tubes at a 20-percent markup plus shipping; he was directly engaged in the hands-on creation of a new, better, streamlined society. A shining, truly amazing new world, without the muttered shibboleths of Gernsback's native central Europe.

His secret goal was not just to master the new techno-products on American shelves, but to fill his world with awe, glamor and wonder.

Science fiction was rarely if ever accepted as "literature," but it thrived as the unifying force of a persistent and important subculture. Science fiction really did possess genuine magic and a mythic dimension. It brought a gusher of the holy fire into lives that otherwise might have seemed cramped, geekish and bleak. It was a spearhead of cognition, a liberator of the century's imagination, a ventilator of the soul.

But—like the radio business that gave it birth—sci-entification was also a commercial enterprise. Sense-of-wonder as a business policy demonstrated its shortcomings as early as 1929, when Gernsback's Experimenter Publishing Company was bought out by Bernard MacFadden. MacFadden, in his own strange way, was even crankier than the visionary Gernsback. A sinister pulp mogul of nutty health-freak 'zines, MacFadden preyed on human gullibility, and the quixotic hope for a quick and perfect fix. Unlike his rival Gernsback, MacFadden had a firm grasp of pulp publishing's bottom line; he knew what the market would bear. MacFadden left a lasting mark on our tradition as well.

Now it is the end of the 20th century. We live in a world constructed by Gernsback's new men. You can see the skeleton of their mighty labors in the interstate highway system, the contrails of jets, in cable TV and satellite broadcasts, in skyscrapers, dams and power plants. The 20th century has shown an incredible appetite for amazing wonders. It eats them wholesale.

The world of the 1990s is far weirder than the 1920s ever imagined, but it doesn't spend its daily life drenched in amazing wonder. Sci-entification made a business of imagining that life works that way, but it just doesn't: that isn't the truth. Amazement wears off, and the sense of wonder is a very tender, temporary thing.

It's not that the world lacks wonders: it's that men and women just won't stay bent that way. Whenever you are genuinely amazed, it is very

April 1940

To Washington come millions of ants, to demand the right to vote. Met with refusal, they went to the Supreme Court. What would it decide...?

Editor's introduction to "Revolts of the Ants" by Milton Katsky



April 1926

Amazing Stories is launched.



difficult to do or be anything else. Though amazement may fill you with heart-pounding excitement and a visceral sense that life is truly worthwhile, amazement makes it impossible to actually accomplish anything. Worse yet, it makes you pathetically vulnerable to someone else who is looking at the same phenomenon, but with an eye to the main chance. He plays MacFadden to your Gernsback: while your heart is soaring and your jaw is dropped, he makes a sudden lunge for your wallet.

Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic in the golden years of *Amazing*—in 1927. Lindbergh was a 25-year-old aircraft techie in a private plane he himself had commissioned and built. When this very Gernsbackian figure arrived in France, he was met by madly cheering throngs. He was covered in medals, buried in an avalanche of fame. Lindbergh accomplished this feat as a promotional exercise, because he wanted to prove to all doubters that aviation was the transportation method of the future. Lindbergh succeeded amazingly.

Now it's seventy-one years later. If we travel to

France from America today, we do it in a quarter of Lindbergh's flight-time, and we're not met by cheering crowds. Instead, we watch a couple of movies, and maybe have a couple of drinks, in order to deal with the tedium of crossing the Atlantic.

The fault is not in the stars. It's not with Lindbergh either, a brave young man whose ambition and determination were properly rewarded. It's not with those cheering thousands—they were perfectly right to cheer. The fault, if you can call it that, is in the stories we tell ourselves. In the narratives we reel inside our own heads, about what we want, and what we are, and what we do with the things we come to know.

Amazement makes very bad industrial policy. Nuclear power plants are amazing. Being power plants, they play very effectively to dizzying power fantasies. They create electricity through an arcane and astonishing feat of super-advanced 1940s physics. They are shining and towering symbols of technological, political, and military prowess, and they are very romantic—until you find yourself working the night-shift at Chernobyl.



September 1950

When a man holds the waiter the menu and says: "One order of everything!" he's either hungry, crazy—or out of the post!

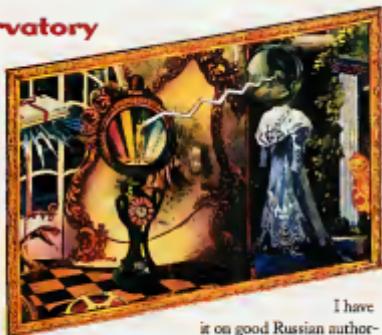
Editor's introduction to "This Table Reserved" by Gilbert Grant

The Observatory

August 1941

Junior had faith in
the space gear he
got by saving box
taps—and he staked
it against real space
pirates.

*Editor's introduction
to "Kid Palace" by
David P. Reed*



April 1942

America was
invaded, and only
Adam Link knew their
identity—invaders
more terrible than
Hitler!

*Editor's introduction
to "Adam Link Sees
the World" by Eando
Bauer*

July 1950

There was simply no
reason for a spy to be
spying... which was why
Martha's job made no
sense until Roger
caught her taking a
bath!

*Editor's introduction to
"The Eyes Are Watching"
by Walt Steneker*

I have
it on good Russian authority

that the guys who worked Chernobyl were Russian science fiction fans. (I'm told they were particularly big on alternate history fiction.) Being human, they found it hard to treat their daily work environment with the insane amount of awe, respect and care that such a mythical techno-beast demands. Their amazement had worn off with the passing years. Despite their praiseworthy reading habits, they had become complacent. Their power plant was no longer a shining technical marvel, it was old hat, old shoes, just plain old. But it still had the same lurking, earth-shattering power it had always had. So thus we get the useful concept of "Chernobyl," a legendary term to rank with "Blogal" and "Frankenstein." An event that created an alternate history for the nuclear power enterprise.

In the amazing super-myth of transcendent technology, we are always the heroes of the breakthrough moment, always the central marvel of creation, never merely mired in history like generations of our predecessors. But the human relationship to scientific fact and technological power is not just amazing. It is also troubled, complex, contradictory, and in many ways simply dishonest.

The amazement is temporary. But that is not such a bad thing. This is a learning process; it shouldn't be mistaken for mere disillusionment or scoffing cynicism. If you landed in France seventy years after Lindbergh, and people were truly amazed by this, that would not be good. It would be a sign of mass psychosis. It would mean that heroic acts were meaningless, that they no longer had real consequences. It would mean we could never change anything.

The 20th century has assimilated an unbelievable, astonishing amount of technological novelty. We have trained ourselves to deal with this and not go mad; we have learned the shortcuts. In particular, we have learned that the easiest way to bleach the wonder out of something is to make it a commodity. When you look at some amazing invention and ask, "Where is the revenue stream?" you have

put on a kind of mental armor that protects you from the most mind-boggling possibilities.

The 20th century has known two great failed technical revolutions: nuclear power and space travel. They were both earthshakingly sublime and intensely science fictional enterprises, and they were both done in by people who asked calm and probing questions about the financial bottom line.

The Soviet Union was a 20th-century technocratic society in which financial questions, like many other questions, were not allowed. The Soviets went for nukes and rockets hook, line, and sinker. If armies of brilliant engineers and physicists deploying super-technologies were enough to conquer our doubting world, then the Soviets would be the world's last superpower today.

In the 1990s, even Science itself, the world of "pure" scientific research and the "pure" quest for knowledge, is under intense commercial siege. Peel the ivy off the ancient walls of modern academic, and you'll see intellectual property battles and incoming waves of corporate sponsorship.

Basic scientific research is the intellectual parent of science fiction and the great engine of 20th-century novelty. But Science nevertheless is increasingly constrained to follow the financiers nowadays.

We no longer have Gernsback's battles to fight. Instead, we deal with the many consequences of his victory. We have seen many technological revolutions, platoons of marvels. We have seen their real-world consequences, not merely on the inventors and the pioneers, but on the children and the grandchildren. We know that "Television" is a byword for the mundane, and that a Gernsbackian personal radio is one of the cheapest and commonest toys on earth.

Today, massive global publicity instantly dissipates the shock of the new. Technologies are truly global now; soon even the most distant New Guinean tribesman will be able to watch cloned sheep the second they trot out of the lab. Though our technologies are vastly more powerful, they hit us with less emotional impact, because people are far less sheltered and parochial. We Americans will probably never again know a sense of future shock as intense as that of a Native American suddenly confronted by a telegraph and a steam engine.

In this environment, science fiction has to struggle for a new role in society. Why should eccentric radio salesmen whip up mythic enthusiasm for us? We have professional ad execs with multimillion-dollar budgets to put a shine on our new crystal sets. In a world like this, "science-fiction" becomes a billboard, a marketing device—not for the Endless Frontier of Science, but for plastic action figures. They leap off the shelves and into a million dens and playrooms, fighting their

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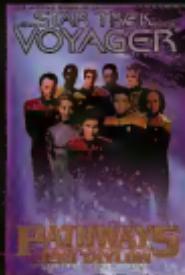
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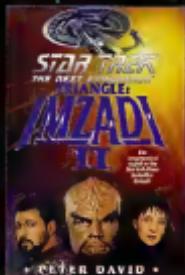
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her love for Lieutenant Commander Worf.



July 1940, "Discussions" column

Do you have to make your covers quite so gaudy? That last cover was enough to give people nightmares. What happened to the photographic covers?

From a reader

The only trouble with photographic covers is the problem of getting them of a science fiction nature. It would be a tremendous job, for instance, to photograph this month's cover. Not that we wouldn't give our right arm to present a scene like this in an actual photo. Would that be something?

Response from B. G. Davis, editor

gallant saber duels against bug-eyed galactic monsters. Today, this has become our thriving bottom line. It's science fiction as window dressing, a chrome-colored retailer for the multinational culture industry.

It might be sourly said that in an environment like this, amazement is childish, or even dangerous. To be amazed in such a world marks you out as a sucker, a mark, a rub. If you're all that impressed, you must be out of the loop; you must not know the whole story.

OR MAYBE IT'S JUST THE OPPOSITE. MAYBE you know the whole story rather too well. And here, it seems to me, is science fiction's saving grace.

It's not quite that easy to nail us down, thank you; Lord knows it's been tried before, but we don't stand still for it. Wonder may be childish, but youth has its prerogatives. Honesty and frankness are among them. Energy, too, along with a healthy sense of much to gain and little to lose.

These are not the 1920s; we are no longer allowed Hugo Gernsback's peculiar variety of wonder. Instead, this is a society whose population is steadily aging, increasingly crabbed and conservative. It's also a society mesmerized by cash on the barrelhead. It has dire need of fresh and genuine vision. Wonder will get you through times of no money better than money will get you through times of no wonder.

Without vision, the people perish.

There are more sources of wonder around than the hyperactive vagaries of the high-tech consumer society. The cosmos is still just as huge, the vistas of geological time just as startling, our place in the midst of this just as problematical as it ever was. A person who refuses to see thrilling wonder in our cosmos is not an entirely human being; he is mentally disabled and in real need of our help.

It seems to me that science fiction has truly splendid opportunities now. Not imaginary opportunities or childish power fantasies: real and genuine artistic and literary possibilities, activities which are at the core of any real civilization. We have an opportunity now to really come into our own, to genuinely meet the enormous challenge of our 20th-century heritage. Because now we know. For the first time ever, science fiction has the chance to tell real and honest truths about both Science and Fiction, to a general society where these two things are of genuinely vital and immediate interest.

Science fiction can do these things. It doesn't always do them, and even more rarely does it do them well, but in seventy years we have proven that they are possible to do. They are not the only things science fiction can do, or the only things

we do that are well worth doing; but they are our birthright, the things that we can do better and more authentically than anyone else. Science fiction has unique virtues: it can make the invisible visible, it can stretch the limits, it can supply mental oxygen to expansive thinkers of all stripes and varieties.

Science fiction has survived the 20th century. We have done even better than that; we have known amazement and we've learned by the experience.

The pulp magazine market no longer exists. It's gone, it's obsolete.

But the spirit of this publication refuses to die. *Amazing* has been killed so many times that I have lost count, but now *Amazing* rises once again! Another incarnation, a new and fancier glossy coat, a new set of backers, tie-ins, and sponsors, a grand new scheme to cling to the shelves and leap into the hands of an eager public! This is a genuine cause for celebration.

Every new periodical offers science fiction the thing we need more than anything else, our very cause for being: the chance to make new mistakes.

I know the next century needs to be Amazing. I'm going to subscribe!

I have high hopes. ▲

About the author

Bruce Sterling has been getting his amazing fiction, both short stories and novels, published for more than 20 years. He won the Hugo Award in 1997 for his novella "Bicycle Repairman," and has produced a number of highly acclaimed novels including Islands in the Net and Holy Fire. His next novel, Distraction, is due out in late 1998.

He is also the author of a nonfiction book, The Hacker Crackdown, as well as numerous nonfiction and criticism pieces for publications such as The New York Times, Wired, and The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. He has been a member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America ever since Salman Rushdie was condemned by religious fanatics.



About the illustrator

Educated as a printmaker at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the Art Institute of Chicago, John Craig has an inexhaustible appetite for leftovers. His collages, created from the detritus of the last hundred years, have a haunting familiarity yet evoke a history that is yet to be imagined.

His other worldly assemblages have appeared in Time, Money, U.S. News & World Report, and The New York Times.

EL HAZARD 2

The Magnificent World



Volume English Dubbed English Subtitled
Volume 1 PIVA-15410 PIVA-15415
Volume 2 PIVA-15420 PIVA-15425

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S.R.P.

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From Silver Screen to Superstore

TWENTY YEARS AGO it was common to see an occasional mention on a movie poster (usually in the tiny print reserved for the credit given to the assistant cinematographers) indicating that you should read the (insert publisher's name here) book that is based on the film.

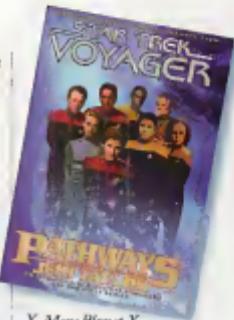
Legendary bestsellers such as *Star Wars* by George Lucas (really written by Alan Dean Foster), *Alien* by Alan Dean Foster, *E.T.* by William Kotzwinkle, *Outland* by Alan Dean Foster, *Dead and Buried* by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, and *Pale Rider* by (yet again) Alan Dean Foster all made the national bestsellers' lists by providing readers with a literary way of experiencing—or, in most cases, reexperiencing—the blockbuster movie that was currently playing at a nearby theater. Occasionally a paperback house would do a series of spinoff novels after the fact, such as the "Dirty Harry" series of men's adventure titles, or the "Dark Shadows" series of supernatural gothics by Marilyn (really Daniel) Ross, but such lines were never held in very high regard and usually relegated to the lower echelon of titles in any given month.



A 1998 roundup of media tie-ins

Over the past few years, the spinoff novels of established movie/TV series have shared in the bestselling glory of their novelization brethren, and have thus given birth to whole lines of media tie-in fiction and nonfiction that little by little have come to dominate the bestseller lists for science fiction and fantasy with books based on such household names as *Star Wars*, *The X-Files*, and *Alien* basking in the cinematic glory that begat them.

Pocket Books is the custodian of primarily only one media franchise, but it is probably the largest and most active program, with no less than four distinct sublines that manage to run parallel to each other while occasionally utilizing line crossovers to maximize marketing potential. In addition to taking advantage of all four *Star Trek* television series as active lines, the program also keeps itself up to date with the latest *Trek* films (the novelization for the currently untitled *Star Trek 9* is scheduled for a November release with a hardcover novelization by J.M. Dillard) as well as other *Trek*-related events such as a crossover with Marvel Comics (*Star Trek: The Next Generation/*



X-Men: Planet X by Michael Jan Friedman).

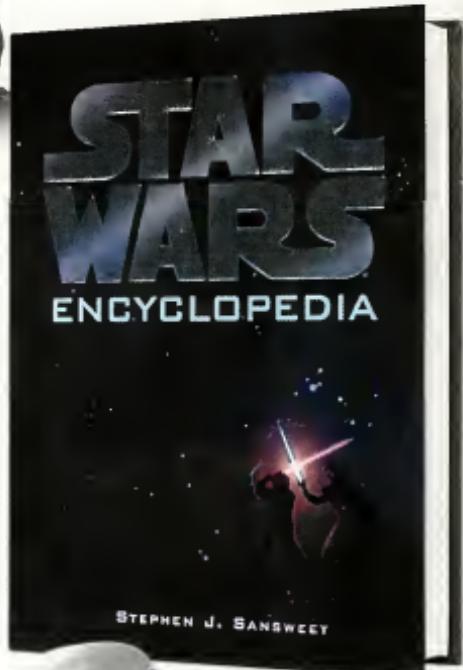
The celebrity *Star Trek* hardcover of the year continues an ongoing series by the legendary Captain Kirk himself, William Shatner (in collaboration with Judith Reeves-Stevens and Garfield Reeves-Stevens). The latest title is *Star Trek: Spectre*, to be published in conjunction with the paperback edition of the previous book in the series by Shatner, *Star Trek: Avenger*.

On the paperback side, multibook series seem to be the order of the day with a crossover series entitled "Captain's Table" with individual books by different authors in each of the *Star Trek* lines, a single-author multivolume series in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* line (*The Q Continuum* by Greg Cox) and a *Star Trek: The Next Generation/Deep Space Nine* multi-book crossover titled *The*

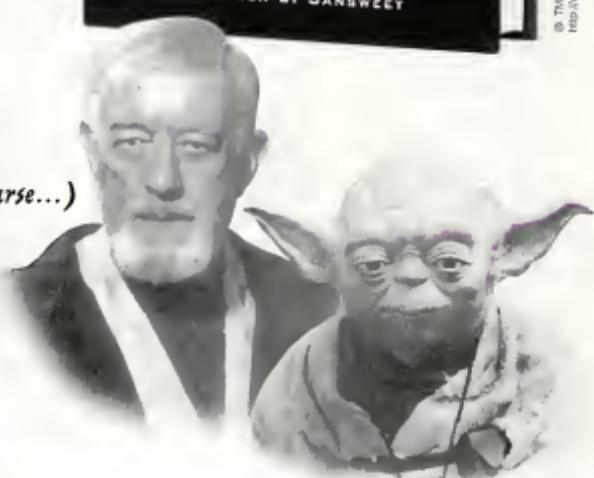


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Dominion War: Also on the release schedule is a trade paperback anthology edited by award-winning author/editor Dean Wesley Smith titled *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds*.

HarperPrism is the line with the widest diversity of media tie-ins, effectively exploring numerous licenses with ingenuity and quality in a variety of formats from novelizations



series including original spin-off novels such as *The X-Files: Skin* by Ben Mezrich, nonfiction such as *I Want to Believe: The Official Guide to The X-Files Volume 3*, and a beautifully upscale coffee-table book titled *The Art of The X-Files* featuring works of art inspired by the TV series with text by the artists. A similar program also exists to tie in with Chris



Carter's other series, *Millennium*, including novelizations of various key episodes by such authors as Elizabeth Hand, Victor Koman, and Lewis Gannett, and a nonfiction series companion by Jane Goldman called *The Official Guide to Millennium*.

Other HarperPrism TV-related tie-ins this year include *The Art of Batman: The Animated Series* designed by Chip Kidd (in hardcover and trade formats), map fold-outs titled *The World of Hercules* and *The Xena Scrolls* (as well as *Xena* and *Hercules* postcard books), a new series of novel spinoffs from the series *Dark Shadows* by former star Lara Parker based around her character of Angelique (the first is titled *Dark Shadows: Angelique's Descent*) and *Clive Barker's A to Z of Horror* (to tie in with the BBC series airing on A&E).

On the theatrical side of

the business, HarperPrism is continuing its series of spin-offs from the movie *Independence Day* with *Independence Day: War in the Desert* by Stephen Molstad, detailing the Mideast campaign against the invaders as briefly glimpsed in the original film—much in the same way that *Independence Day: Silent Zone* drew on the prequel material liberally mixed with Roswell myth and speculation. Molstad is also the author of the novelization of the biggest (quite literally in size) of the summer blockbusters, *Godzilla*—from the folks who brought you *ID4*. HarperPrism is also supporting the big green guy with a “Making of...” book by Rachel Aberly (with a foreword by special effects whiz Volker Engel) and a postcard book.

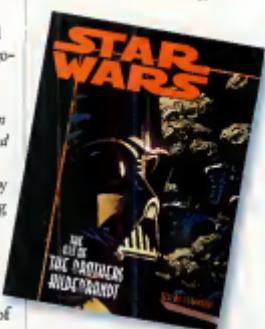
An equally aggressive program has been set up in conjunction with the release of *Last in Space*, which includes a novelization by Joan D. Vinge, a “Making of...” book by award-winning SF author Pat Cadigan, a set of blueprints for the legendary *Jupiter 2* spacecraft, and a postcard book. Cadigan will also write the first of an ongoing series of spinoff novels related to the film, and for nostalgia fans there is *Lost in Last in Space: Pop Culture and Space Adventure with the Space-Traveling Robinsons* by Mark Cotta Vaz, an amusing and insightful look at the past years in relation to the 1960s TV series.

Roundout the HarperPrism list is a series of novels spun off from *The Crow* theatrical series, including *The Lazarus Heart* by Poppy Z. Brite and *Clash by*

Night by Chet Williamson; *The Complete Aliens*, a nonfiction retrospective of all four *Alien* films by Paul M. Sammon (author of the critically acclaimed *Future Noir*), including interviews with all four directors as well as Sigourney Weaver; calendar tie-ins to *Titanic*, *The Simpson*, and the *Aliens* 20th anniversary; and new booster packs for the *Alien/Predator* card game.

The HarperPaperbacks lists also includes two notable tie-ins: the novelization of the now classic first *Highlander* film (which has never been available before in the United States) by award-winning British SF author Garry Kilworth, and the novelization of the upcoming vampire-hunting hero film *Blade*, starring Wesley Snipes, by Mel Odom.

Del Rey—after inauspicious tie-in excursions into *Mars Attacks* and *Tarzan: The Epic Adventures*—has made major commitments to both the *Star Wars* (with total control of new novels and novelization tie-ins to the new Lucasfilm trilogy in



the summer of 1999) and the *Babylon 5* licenses.

The *Babylon 5* program

to novel-spinoffs to related nonfiction and merchandise. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in its handling of *The X-Files* license, which the publisher has continuously supported with a full line of adult digest and young adult novels, wall and desk calendars, and postcard books.

The summer 1998 movie event entitled *The X-Files: The Feature Film* will be supported by a novelization by its creator Chris Carter (shades of the original *Star Wars* novelization by George Lucas) in hardcover and mass-market formats; a “Making of...” book by Jody Duncan, and a scrapbook in trade formats. (The novelization and making of books will also be available in abridged versions for the juvenile audience.)

Numerous tie-ins are also scheduled for the ongoing TV

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includes novelizations of the TNT premiere movies by Peter David (based on the screenplays by J. Michael Straczynski), the first of a series of seasonal episode guides, and *The Official Babylon 5 Security Manual*. A trilogy of original spinoff novels in the vein of the books



previously published by Dell are scheduled for either late this year or early 1999 and will be written by Del Rey author J. Gregory Keyes.

While Del Rey is limited to continuing its *Star Wars* non-fiction program only for 1998 before the 1999 inauguration of the new license, the program is nonetheless well represented by the upcoming publication of the eagerly awaited *Star Wars Encyclopedia*. The 1999 novel program will include books by veteran *Star Wars* author Michael Stackpole as well as Margaret Weis & Don Perrin and various writers from the Del Rey stable.

Later this year Del Rey will also be publishing the first of a series of novels related to the now defunct *Timelord* TV series. The first three of these time-travel adventures will be written by veteran TSR novelist Dan Parkinson.

Bantam Spectra enjoys the last year of its *Star Wars* publishing program with new books in the bestselling "X-Wing" series with new books by Aaron Allston (taking over at the helm from Mike Stackpole), a new paperback series by K.W. Jeter titled *Star Wars: The Bounty Hunter Wars*, and new hardcovers by veteran *Star Wars* authors such as

Star Wars: Jedi by Michael Stackpole and *Star Wars: Vision of the Future* by Timothy Zahn.

Bantam will also publish new books to tie in with Dark Horse Comics' ongoing *Aliens* series, such as *Aliens/Berserker* by S.D. Perry and possibly new books spun off from the *Men In Black* franchise.

Berkley, with the exception of original novels that precede the films that go into release (such as the classics *Starship Troopers* and *Dune*, which are published under the Ace imprint), primarily uses its Boulevard imprint for its various licenses (including tie-ins to Marvel Comics by such authors as Diane Duane, Michael Jan Friedman, and *ehki bes shahar*) and media tie-ins. Titles for 1998 include two *Quantum Leap* novels (*For Knowledge* by Christopher DeFilippi and *Song and Dance* by Mindy Peterman); three *Star Wars: Young Jedi Knights* young adult novels by Kevin J. Anderson & Rebecca Moesta; a new *Star Wars: Dark Forces* hardcover by

William C. Dietz; and a new *Forever Knight* book (*These Our Revels* by Anna Hathaway-Nayse).

Warner, due to the postponement of the upcoming Tim Burton *Superman* film, is light on media tie-ins though still continuing its successful *Highlander* series with new books by Rebecca Neason, Joseph Sherman, and Ginjer Buchanan, as well as adding to its list with *The Official and Authorized Highlander Companion* by Maureen Russell.

Baen Books continues a quasi-association with media tie-ins in its Starline imprint, featuring science fiction and fantasy novels written by TV stars whose main characters bear a thematic resemblance to the characters that they themselves portray. Previous books in this series have included *The Rising* by James Doohan & S.M. Stirling and *Keeper of the King* by Nigel Bennett & P.N. Elrod, while new titles include *Diplomatic Acts* by Peter Jurasik & William Keith, Jr., and *Tennebrea* by Roxanne Dawson & Dan Graham.

Avon Books is light on media tie-ins, though one of its major paperback fantasy reprints of the fall is the richly imaginative *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman, which is based on a limited-d-run miniseries that he wrote for the BBC.

DAW Books' only media-related title is an anthology, *The Real Stuff*, which features the original short stories upon which the films *Mimic*

(Donald A. Wollheim), *Screamers* and *Total Recall* (both by Philip K. Dick), *Amanda and the Alien* (Robert Silverberg), *Sandkings* and *Nightflyers* (both by George R.R. Martin), *Millennium* (John Varley), *Candyman* (Clive Barker), *Johnny Mnemonic* (William Gibson), *Enemy Mine* (Barry B. Longyear), and *Re-Animator* (H.P. Lovecraft) were based. It is due out in the late summer, just in time for back to school summer book reports.

Media tie-ins are often added to a publisher's schedule at the last possible minute and as a result they sometimes appear in bookstores without much notice to the general public. Typically, a movie's box-office success will usually lead to even more tie-in titles after the fact, as publishers hurry to tap into the latest subject that has captured the public's fancy. At the time of this writing, there are no less than eight bestselling books tied to the film *Titanic*, and twice that number of related titles also available at your nearest superstore.

It would appear that anything that succeeds is worth doing again and again, as long as the public keeps coming back for more. For some fans it's *Star Wars*, for others *The X-Files* (I, for one, applaud the return of *Dark Shadows*), and there is no easier way to reexperience the magic of the moving image than on the printed page.

Tie-ins are here to stay for as long as the moving image continues to make money. □

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Go Beyond

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BY JAMES ALAN
GARDNER

Sense of Wonder

[After school, 4:30 p.m.]

Nicholas: How 'bout the collision of two Dyson spheres?

Brendan: Bor-ring.

N: Two *sentient* Dyson spheres.

B: How can a Dyson sphere be sentient? It's just, like, a shell with a sun inside.

N: Both spheres are made of nanotech. You know? Little microscopic robots and they're all linked into big hiveminds.

B: So the spheres are big computers?

N: *Hive-minds*. Because each nanite is sentient on its own. Each one is way smarter than humans to begin with.

B: If they're so smart, why are the spheres colliding? They should just change course.

N: Because... because one sphere is made of matter and the other's antimatter! A big antimatter Dyson sphere, the size of a whole solar system, right? And it's getting pulled toward the one made out of normal matter because opposites attract.

B: You mean like you and Ashley McGregor?

N: I am *not* attracted to... the only reason I even talk to her is just she lives two houses down from me.

B: Suppose the Dyson spheres are getting together to make out.

N: What?

B: You're the one who said they're sentient. And they're, like, you know, billion-year-old *virgins*.

N: Yeah, right. Virgins!

B: Stupid old virgins.

N: Wait a second. If they're both *spheres* and they want to get it on, doesn't that make them gay?

B: One is matter and the other is antimatter.

N: That doesn't make a difference. They're both spheres!

B: Oh, yeah. I see your point.

N: Now if one of them was a *ringworld*...

B: Right. Then, like, the sphere could go *right through* the ringworld. You know, kind of back and forth...

N: In and out.

B: Yeah. Except doesn't a ringworld have a sun?

N: Oh, right. Ringworlds have a sun in the middle.

B: So when the Dyson sphere tries to, you know, slide through the ring, it gets kind of scorched.

N: What can I say? Love hurts.

B: Is that what Ashley tells you?

N: Look, I just walk home with her sometimes, okay? We live so close together—

B: Suppose it's a *ghost* ringworld.

N: A what?

B: Like it doesn't *have* a sun. It's all dark and cold and creepy.

N: And the Dyson sphere is just going through space, minding its own business, when it sees this thing floating out there.

B: So the sphere kind of drifts up slowly, and as it's sliding inside, it goes like, "Hello? Hello? Anybody here?"

N: Oh, sure, like it can talk in a *vacuum*!

B: It sends radio signals.

N: How 'bout it creates holographic words across its surface?

B: Or maybe Dyson spheres talk with *pheromones*.

N: That's cool.

B: Its atmosphere is filled with this kind of perfume called, "Hello? Hello? Anybody here?"

N: Which is basically what they should call all perfumes. "Hello? Hello? Is anyone paying attention to me?"

B: Like Janice Wozniak.

N: Yeah, right, Janice Wozniak. Swimming in Chanel or something.

B: Does Ashley wear perfume?

N: She wants to but her mom won't let her. Perfume, makeup, all that stuff.

B: You talk to Ashley about makeup?

N: Oh, fuck off! Fuck right off! I thought we were talking about Dyson spheres.

B: A Dyson sphere sliding into a ghost ringworld.

N: And like it gets partway inside, when the ring closes up like a bear trap! Boom. And the Dyson sphere is snared!

B: Very psychological.

N: It's not psychological! It's... it's... okay, the ring *doesn't* close like a bear trap.

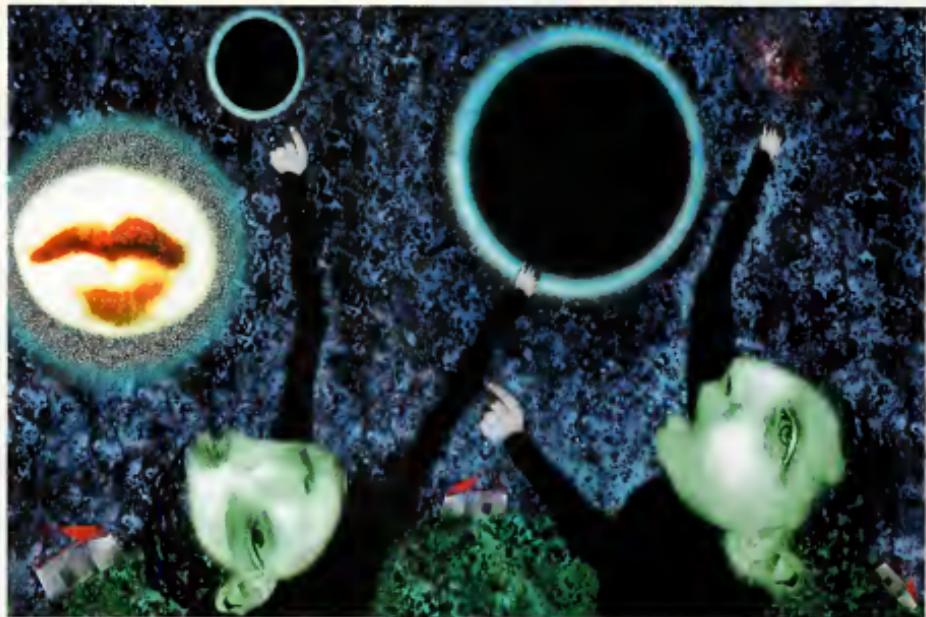
B: It just sits there, dark and cold.

N: And the sphere passes through and keeps on going.

B: Pheromones and all.

N: Off into the blackness.

ILLUSTRATION BY
MICHAEL MORGENSEN



[Pause.]

B: It's still psychological.

N: I know it's psychological! But what do you want? That the sphere turns around and comes limping back? No way! The ringworld is the one who's being all cold and dark. It's not the sphere's fault if it's just, like, a friend, and the ringworld is really interested in some jerk of a *nebula*!

B: Ashley likes Justin?

N: As if she talks about anyone else.

B: Maybe she's trying to make you jealous.

N: She could wish. Just wait till we're rich and famous writers. We'll be masking millions on the bestseller list...

B: And she'll be with Justin. Kind of its own punishment.

N: So the Dyson sphere couldn't care less about the ringworld. It doesn't want to get anywhere *near* the ringworld.

B: The sphere just sits back and laughs while the ringworld gets sucked into a huge black hole.

N: Nah. Black holes are way too psychological.

B: You're right. How 'bout the sphere goes in and out and through the ringworld but it doesn't mean anything?

N: Oh, sure, like that isn't creepy. The ringworld isn't *seriously* bad. It's just ... looking for sun in all the wrong places.

B: So it might come around.

N: How should I know? I can't even tell what would be a happy ending, okay? Because on the one hand, it's so stupid to care, when it means getting all involved in... ringworld stuff. That's just crazy. But on the other hand...

B: Ringworlds are really really pretty.

N: Yeah.

[Pause.]

B: How 'bout this: What's really going on here is there are these two gods, right? And all this stuff with the ringworld and the Dyson sphere, it turns out the gods are just playing hoops.

N: Ooo. Nice twist.

B: Cosmic basketball.

N: Perfect solution.

B: My driveway or yours?

[Pause.]

N: Mine. Ashley might walk by. ▲

About the author

James Alan Gardner is the author of *Expendable* and *Commitment Hour* (both from Avon) and numerous short stories. Long ago and far away, he got his master's in math... although he spent much of his grad school career writing musical comedy instead of his thesis. "Sense of Wonder" is his fifth story for this magazine.



Jim lives in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. For a day job, he writes computer documentation. At night, he takes kung fu because he gets great bruises and loves to show them off.

About the illustrator

Michael Morgenstern loves and makes art in New York. His illustrations have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The New Yorker*, among other publications. He likes to collage and paint digitally, enjoying the freedom of spontaneous experimentation offered by this medium.





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WHAT TO SEE AND DO

- (1) Chlerion has a long and fascinating history. Its architecture, music and crafts are unrivaled—a "must" for every visitor.

The ruins at Xalabak, only two kilometers outside Chola, the capital city, are among the oldest and most picturesque in the Confederation of Worlds. The Nine Hundred Towers of Dhal at this site are particularly breathtaking. Rising some two thousand meters above the golden plains, this awesome sight is truly one of the wonders of the galaxy.

The Singing River of Thaval winds through every section of Chola, and is unique in its charm and beauty. It is said that once a visitor hears the haunting song of Thaval, the music of other worlds pales to insignificance.

The Living Gardens of Thegeen are visible at every corner in Chola, and are perhaps the most widely acclaimed of all the sights on Chlerion. As Andercote so ably puts in his *Wonders of a Hundred Worlds*, "Nature has seldom displayed itself so lavishly."

- (2) Visitors are strictly forbidden to visit, photograph or gaze in the direction of any historic or unusual attraction on Chlerion—especially the above mentioned areas.

WHAT TO BUY ON CHLERION

- (1) Chlerion offers many splendid buys in liquor, drugs, precious metals, gems and artifacts. Stores are colorful and inviting, and local merchants enjoy engaging in spirited bargaining. Especially popular here are uncut gems of unusual size and quality. The rich geological history of Chlerion has created an abundance of mineral wealth. Precious stones

are commonplace: It is not unusual to find 20-carat emeralds and diamonds for sale at even the smallest, most insignificant shop.

- (2) Visitors will enjoy shopping on Chlerion if a few local traditions are observed:

- (a) Bargaining, as mentioned, is the standard practice here. For instance, you might offer one *Pigre* for an item. The merchant, perhaps, counters with 10. You come back with 5, and you seal the bargain at 7. Bidding and counterbidding can become quite exciting.
- (b) Entering or passing a shop is considered a contract to buy.
- (c) Any merchandise of any type or quantity offered for sale must be accepted by the buyer.
- (d) Prices may vary, as exchange rates are determined by the individual merchant.
- (e) Exchange rates are not announced until the sale has been completed.

NOTE: Some visitors find it difficult to adapt to local shopping practices, since any and all merchandise purchased is confiscated prior to reembarkation. [See: CUSTOMS REGULATIONS, (2)]. However, the invertebrate shopper will find this colorful deviation from the ordinary marketplace a most enjoyable experience.

WHAT TO EAT

- (1) Chlerion has high standards of sanitation, and tourists may patronize all eating establishments with confidence. Service is excellent, and the food superb. While dishes from many worlds are available, the visitor should not overlook the many unusual local offerings.

- (a) *Musik* is a spicy meat dish with a delicate flavor reminiscent of eel and chocolate.
- (b) *Culiz* is a (live) swine-like animal prepared in a variety of different ways. Try *Culiz-Tig*, a stew made with the local herbs, *Rishi*, whose triple blossoms contain powerful restrictive, purgative and aphrodisiacal drugs.

NOTE: A hint to first-time visitors: As Hastick points out in his comprehensive *Races of the Outer Stars*, the natives of Chlerion have no true form of their own, and frequently imitate beings from other worlds, inanimate objects, clothing, foliage, etc. While highly intelligent, they are by nature a happy, carefree folk, given to childish pranks. A visitor may, for instance, find himself the subject of local humor while dining at a Chlerion restaurant. Waiters like to increase tips by demonstrating their versatility—thus, diners should not be alarmed if their entrée

suddenly assumes various colors and shapes. Often, in the better restaurants, several waiters will join together to form elegant creations on a tourist's plate. On rare occasions, the entire staff will merge as a single being and ceremoniously urinate on a favored guest.

(2) Since, as mentioned, passengers may not bring anything of any sort aboard ship, ample time should be allowed prior to liftoff for RFC (Reclamation of Food Consumed) by the ship's medical personnel.

ENTRY AND REENTRY PROCEDURES

(1) Since the natives of Chlerion frequently imitate visitors, passengers will wear their Cruise Badges at all times during excursions ashore.

- (a) Inventive citizens often duplicate visitors' Cruise Badges, as well as the visitors themselves.
- (b) To date, there is no sure method of distinguishing true passengers from their Chlerion imitators.
- (c) Only one Cruise Badge per passenger will be readmitted aboard ship.

SEXUAL ENCOUNTERS

(1) Sexual encounters with members of the local population are strictly forbidden. Evidence of such contact will result in sterilization procedures. "Evidence" is here defined as: Passenger Debarkation on Chlerion.

- (a) Refusal to engage in sexual relations is considered a serious affront on Chlerion.

ALTERNATE SHIP'S ACTIVITIES

(1) A full range of activities is scheduled for visitors who do not wish to tour Chlerion. Such activities include a ping-pong tournament, *Tzian* competition, shuffleboard and guest parties.

- (a) Chlerion customs forbids any and all such activities by visiting vessels.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- (1) Under Chlerion law, passengers who choose to disembark are automatically granted citizenship, and an award of 1,000 *Pigres*. Such passengers are forbidden to reembark.
- (2) Under Chlerion law, passengers who choose not to disembark may retain their present citizenship and receive an award of 50,000 *Pigres*. Penalty for failure to disembark is death by goring.
- (3) For further information on Chlerion, see your *STARTOUR* Information Booth on Deck C-2.
- (4) Company regulations forbid the presence of passengers on Decks B through D. ▲



About the author

Neal Barrett, Jr.'s forty-something novels and numerous short stories

span the field from mystery/suspense, science fiction, Westerns, historical novels, and young adult novels to "off-the-wall" mainstream fiction. He has just completed a new novel, *Dreamer*, and is working on several other projects. "The Complete Guide to Chlerion" is his sixth appearance in *AMAZING Stories* and the first time he has graced these pages since 1974.

About the illustrator



Barry Jackson has experienced a unique career in illustration.

He has created illustrations for major advertising, movie, and record industry campaigns. He has designed the visuals for ten feature films with clients including Paramount, Dreamworks, 20th Century Fox, and Columbia, and is currently production designer on all digital film for an independent company. He is happily married and has two adorable children.



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LAST



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W O R D S

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One of Vulcan's greatest heroes is dead. The gap between father and son, immeasurable before, is now so wide that it can never be closed. Into this tense and tragic situation comes Captain Picard, the last hope for a bridge between the generations....

BY R. C. CRISPIN

AMANDA'S GARDEN WAS STILL BEAUTIFUL.

He stood there staring at it, surprised to discover that it was still maintained. As far as he knew, Spock had not lived in the house for some time. But the garden had been cared for...the spiky black blossoms were properly trimmed, the scarlet wax-leafed bushes pruned, the green waterstone paths raked, the rock arrangements stacked precisely....

He wandered down the paths, hands tucked into the sleeves of his long desert robe, his nostrils taking in the exotic scents of desert plants from a dozen worlds.

Leaving Amanda's garden, he began walking toward distant Vulcan's Forge, pleased by his effortless strides. Information filled his mind, neatly cataloged, and his conclusions were, once again—it had been so long!—faultlessly logical.

The desert surrounded him now as he walked tirelessly, his strong young body obeying his every wish. *Youth is wasted on the young...*he thought, remembering an ancient human saying.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK MAXWELL

Well, for once humans were completely correct.

His mind was so clear, his thinking so precise. Emotion was, once more, suppressed. How agreeable to be able to think clearly, to be free of the constant, degrading assault of emotion!

For a moment it occurred to him to wonder where he was going, and why, but he resolutely suppressed that question. It was enough to be clear-headed and strong of body once more. It was enough to be traveling, going....

Going where?

Once again, he repressed that question, repressed it sternly. *Where is not important. What is important is that I have regained my logic, my control. What is important is that I feel young again...strong again....*

He looked up at the reddish sky, and beheld with wonder a wind-rider gliding along the thermals. Such a fragile, nearly translucent creature—how could it survive Vulcan's hot winds?

But survive it did...and he was fortunate indeed to see it. He had been alive a very long time indeed, and had only seen a handful of wind-riders in all that time....

Alive...can he alive?

Such a question was not logical, and he repressed it, also. Enough to walk, to be clear of mind, controlled, strong and alert. Enough to—

"Captain. Captain Picard. Wake up."

His surroundings shimmered, faded. Not He was on Vulcan, he was in control, he was walking, going—

"Captain Picard. You directed that you wished to be awakened at ab-seven-hundred hours. Wake up, please."

The sleeper's eyes opened. Vulcan vanished. He blinked, dazed and confused. His surroundings were...unfamiliar. Softly gleaming walls; clean-lined, functional furnishings. Not Vulcan in style, Human. He recognized them. He had, after all, had two human wives.

Amanda? he thought, but then he remembered. Amanda was dead. Had been dead. Perrin. Perrin was his wife.

"Perrin?" he whispered.

His voice was completely unfamiliar. He blinked and sat up. *What is happening?* Apprehension stirred, but he repressed it sternly, as was proper.

Rising, he strode over to the washstand. The mirror above it reflected an image. A human male, middle-aged, bald, with handsome, aristocratic features. He recognized that face.

Jean-Luc Picard.

He blinked, and the image blinked back.

Suddenly the world shifted, tilted, and the last of the dream images fled. He gasped, swayed, and instinctively

grabbed the washstand to steady himself. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, the room steadied. Reality rushed back.

Captain Jean-Luc Picard stared at himself in the mirror. *In my dream, I was Sarek. Young again, in control again, strong and logical....* Slowly, Picard ran water into the basin, then splashed it onto his face. The cool liquid felt refreshing against his skin. Reaching for a towel, he wiped his face.

I haven't dreamed that I was Sarek for months. Why now? It's so ironic that I should dream of our mind-meld now, because Sarek is, after all, dead. He died four days ago, at home on Vulcan. His memorial service is scheduled for tomorrow....

Picard walked over to a chair, lowered himself into it. His previous dreams about Sarek had been fuzzy, distorted, shadows left over from the mind-meld they had shared. Nothing akin to what he'd just experienced. That had been so clear, so real! He'd awakened actually believing himself to be Sarek. But the Vulcan Ambassador was dead. Bendii Syndrome had killed him, after a lingering last illness that had left Sarek stripped of all emotional control. A cruel disease, Bendii Syndrome. Picard couldn't imagine a worse fate for a Vulcan than losing all emotional control, having his feelings bared for anyone to witness.

Why now? Picard thought. Then the events of yesterday came rushing back, and he knew.

Yesterday, Picard had left Ambassador Spock behind on Romulus to continue his efforts to reunite the Romulan and Vulcan peoples. After Spock had told Picard of his decision to remain on Romulus, Picard had had the Vulcan a reluctant farewell.

But, as a last gesture of goodwill, the captain had invited Spock to mind-meld with him. Spock and Sarek, the Vulcan had admitted, had never chosen to meld, so Picard made the offer so Spock could experience Sarek's mind through him.

As Spock had sensed Sarek's consciousness from the captain's mind, his Vulcan control had visibly faltered, and it was obvious Spock was finally allowing himself to grieve over the loss of his father.

Picard had been glad to be able to give the Vulcan that last chance at contact with Sarek....

The mind-meld with Ambassador Spock, Picard realized. It must have awakened the part of me that was linked to Sarek during our meld. That explains that vivid dream....

Picard glanced over at his replicator. "Tea, Earl Grey, hot," he said. His voice was steady. It was only a dream, after all.

The captain sipped his tea while he dressed, and his mind drifted back to the last few minutes he had spent with Spock the day before. As they walked along the ancient Romulan passage from the meeting place, Spock had glanced over at Picard and said, "Thank you for bringing me the news of my father's death, Picard. I have thought about him a great deal over the past few days."

"As have I," Picard had responded. "If we can return to Federation space in time, I intend to request that the

Enterprise be sent to Vulcan. I would like to attend Sarek's memorial service."

"Yes," Spock replied. "It would be only proper to have the flagship of the Federation in attendance. And her captain, of course."

Sarek's memorial service... thought the captain. I must contact the admiral.

After checking on the bridge and going through the usual morning status reports, Picard retired to his ready room and activated the communications relay.

Only a minute later, the captain found himself looking at the image of Admiral Brackett, the Starfleet officer who had sent him to find Ambassador Spock on Romulus and determine whether the Vulcan had—as Starfleet feared—defected.

Brackett blinked at the captain of the *Enterprise* in surprise. "Captain! This is pleasant, if unexpected. Do you have something to add to your report?"

Picard shook his head, feeling bemused, but then found himself speaking in his usual precise, assured tones. "Admiral, Ambassador Sarek's memorial service is tomorrow. I request that the *Enterprise* be permitted to represent Starfleet there."

Brackett hesitated, then said, "I have assigned the Potemkin, Captain."

Picard's lips tightened. "But, Admiral, if I may—"

Her rounded features beneath her short hair softened as the admiral interrupted. "Jean-Luc, I know you and Ambassador Sarek were...close. If you wish to attend, I will authorize the *Enterprise* to serve as a second honor guard vessel. Goodness knows, a man of Sarek's stature deserves to have the flagship of the fleet in attendance. Can you make it there in time? It will be tight."

Picard nodded, and a tremendous feeling of relief swept through him. He would be there, as he *must* be. He would be able to say a final farewell to the Vulcan he had shared minds with. Admiral Brackett was correct—he and Sarek had been as close as it was possible for two sentient beings to be. They had, for the duration of the Legaran negotiations, become one mind, one consciousness.

"The *Enterprise* will be there, Admiral," Picard said. "And I thank you."

She nodded. "Pity Ambassador Spock won't be in attendance. It's traditional, I understand, for the family members of the deceased to make a brief statement." Brackett regarded Picard across the piers. "I read your report, Captain. Talk about what you call 'cowboy diplomacy'! Tell me...do you think Spock has a snowball's chance in hell of fostering reunification between the Romulans and the Vulcans?"

Picard shook his head. "I don't know, Admiral. I do know that he is determined to try, and that there is no one better suited to the task."

She nodded. "Again, Captain, I commend you and your

crew for the excellent work on uncovering that Romulan plot. If it hadn't been for the *Enterprise*, Vulcan might actually have been in danger of finding itself occupied by a Romulan invasion force."

"I believe that Sela and the Proconsul gravely underestimated the spirit of the Vulcan people, Admiral," Picard said. "Being a pacifist is by no means the same thing as being weak. If that Romulan force had actually landed on Vulcan, they would have been dealt with...logically and efficiently."

Brackett smiled, her small eyes dancing. "I think you're right, Jean-Luc."

After Picard broke the connection, he walked onto the bridge, to find Commander Data at the helm. "Mr. Data, set course for Vulcan," he said.

Data's fingers were a blur over the navigational controls. "Course laid in, Captain."

"Ahead warp factor seven, Mr. Data. Engage."

Enterprise quivered fractionally, then the star-blurs surrounding them narrowed and elongated even more as the great starship flung herself into high warp.

AS THE MERCILESS VULCAN SUN HOVERED ABOVE THE distant, rugged horizon, Captain Picard, Lieutenant Commander LaForge, and Commander Data materialized not far from the ancient steps that zigzagged up the peak known as Mount Seleny.

Midway up the mountain stood the temple and amphitheater where Sarek's memorial service would be held. Memorials were traditionally held at sunset, but a few early arrivals were already there, long Vulcan robes brushing the ground, their sandaled feet flashing from beneath their folds as they began the ascent.

Picard took a deep breath of the thin air, feeling the heat strike him like a blow. Even with 40 Eridani no longer directly overhead, it was like standing before a roaring bonfire. The heat enveloped him like a lover, clinging to every centimeter of skin, and the thin air didn't help. Picard was grateful for the dose of tri-ox Beverly Crusher had administered to the two humans before permitting them to beam down.

The captain stood there, gazing around him, feeling an odd sense of having *come home*.

But he had only been on Vulcan a few times in his life, most recently just a week ago, when he had gone to visit Sarek during his last days. Picard had beamed down to the front steps of Sarek's home in ShiKahr, and gotten only a brief glimpse of the ambassador's home as Perrin had guided him to Sarek's stark, unadorned bedroom. It had distressed the captain greatly to see the ambassador reduced to a shivering, babbling shell of the man Picard had admired for years—admired even before he'd ever met him.

Moved by an impulse he didn't stop to analyze, Picard turned away from the steps, and stared down at the plains

A Feeling of relief swept through Picard. He would be there, as he must be.

below. There, in the middle of the flat land, lay the city of ShiKahr.

As Picard stood there, looking down on ShiKahr, memories not his own assailed him. He realized that he knew ShiKahr, knew it as well as he knew the family vineyards back on Earth in the French province of Lombardy. He could have been set down anywhere in the city below and unerringly made his way around, finding shops, public gathering places, the homes of Sarek's friends and colleagues. The captain of the *Enterprise* realized that he could have walked unerringly from one end of the city to the other.

A benefit of sharing Sarek's mind last year....

But that was a year ago, Picard thought. Why am I experiencing these memories now?

It wasn't just memories of places; there were memories of people he'd never known, too. When he'd first regarded Ambassador Spock's saturnine features a few days ago on Romulus, Picard had experienced a flicker of recognition and joy at seeing his best friend once more. There was just one catch—at the time when they met on Romulus, Picard barely knew Ambassador Spock, except by reputation. He had met him only once, decades before, when he'd attended Spock's bonding ceremony—as someone had explained it, "more than a betrothal, but somewhat less than a formal marriage, Lieutenant."

So why that instant of joyful recognition? That spark of emotion one feels for one's closest friend?

It had taken Picard some time to sort out, but finally he'd been able to identify those emotions. Apparently Sarek had also mind-melded with another captain of the *Enterprise*, some time before Captain James T. Kirk's tragic death back in 2293. Kirk had died a hero while saving the *Enterprise* from some kind of strange space anomaly. He was one of Starfleet and the Federation's greatest heroes. And he and Spock had been best friends.

Picard wondered why he wasn't experiencing anger at Sarek for leaving him with these grafted-on memories. After the Borg "possession" of his body and mind had transformed him into Locutus, he'd been so filled with rage, hatred, and anger that it had sickened him, and he'd considered leaving Starfleet. It had taken him a visit to Earth and LaBarre, plus many sessions with Counselor Troi, before he'd been able to sleep without terrifying nightmares.

But the meld with Sarek, while it had left him with memories not his own, just wasn't the same. Even now, after experiencing the occasionally unsettling and inconvenient flashes from that other mind, Picard was still glad that he'd chosen to meld with Sarek.

Picard slowly turned away from his home (*His home? No! Sarek's home! Spock's home! Not his!*) and let himself take in the stark, terrifying beauty of the landscape before him.

Jagged stone thrust upward like spears. The lowering sun turned the naked rockfaces the color of human blood. Two

peaks challenged the sky—Mount Seleya was the taller of the two by far; a narrow stone bridge connected it to the slender spire that was Mount Trenaya. Even though Picard didn't speak Vulcan, he discovered that he knew the meanings of those names. "Seleya" meant "sacred mountain" and "Trenaya" meant "infant mountain."

Since time out of mind, Mount Seleya had housed the adepts of the Vulcan mental disciplines. Much of the mountain was honeycombed with chambers, corridors, and shrines cut from the living rock. It was here, in the Hall of Ancient Thought, that the *kasras* of those who had passed on paused and took their final, incorporeal, leave-taking before departing for What Lay Ahead.

When a Vulcan lay dying, he or she would be brought here, and the adepts would help ease the transition of the katra from the body to the Hall of Ancient Thought.

*Except in Spock's case, Picard thought. It was one of the strangest chapters in Ambassador Spock's extraordinary record that his empty but still-breathing shell had once been brought here by Captain Kirk and his friends, and his mind and spirit had been re-fused in an ancient ritual known as *fael-tor-pau*.*

"Wow," Geordi La Forge said. "This is my first time on Vulcan, Captain." He wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his uniform. "Even hotter than I expected, but it's worth it. What an incredible view I'm seeing! The different heat signatures make everything shimmer in bands of color."

The chief engineer turned his VISORed head, studying the ever-increasing tide of people who were passing through the security checkpoint, then heading for the steps. "That's going to be quite a hike, Captain, especially in this thin air," he added. "Too bad we have to walk up. If I'd known it was this steep, I'd have had O'Brien beam us to the summit."

Picard shook his head. "No," he said, and his voice was harsh, unfamiliar to his own ears. "It is traditional to walk."

"Indeed," Data said, "the ascension of Mount Seleya is analogous, in Vulcan spiritual tradition, to the journey made by the soul in many human cultures. The physical ascent is supposed to cleanse the body and spirit of worldly ties, much as the crossing of the River Jordan, the Styx, the sword-bridge to Ragnarok, the—"

Picard turned to regard his android officer, his "now is not the time for a lecture" look in place. Data broke off and subsided.

"Time for us to start," Picard said. "Starfleet has cautioned me that the Vulcans have refused to have heavy security; only this one checkpoint to verify that all attending are unarmed. So we must all remain alert for any problems. Sarek's memorial service has brought some of the highest officials in the Federation here to pay their last respects. Even the President of the Federation is scheduled to attend. She will be accompanied by security, but many other dignitaries—especially Vulcan ones—will not."

Even now, he was still glad that he'd chosen to meld with Sarek.

Picard glanced up at the peak. "Admiral Brackett informed me that even the Legarans have sent a delegation to honor the man who helped them negotiate formal ties to the Federation."

Geordi LaForge wiped his forehead again. "Well, the Legarans ought to like it here. It's fifty-one-point-six degrees at the moment, and they only need another hundred degrees to make their tank just to their liking."

Picard nodded. Nobody knew more about the Legarans' requirements for life support than LaForge. It had been the chief engineer's unenviable duty to prepare the tank of bubbling, varicolored slime for the Legarans during Sarek's last negotiation.

"Cheer up, Geordi," Data said. "As is typical of desert environments, the temperature should decline rapidly after sunset."

"Yeah, by that time we'll be gone," LaForge said. "Or I'll have melted into a puddle of goo myself."

"Let's go," Picard said. Shoulder to shoulder, the three Starfleet officers walked forward, passed through the security scan, and began climbing the ancient steps.

The steps themselves were carved deeply into the rock, but generations upon generations of Vulcan feet had worn them, made them slightly uneven. Picard, who was on the outside of the steps, had to watch his footing, because there was no railing. He resisted the urge to look over the increasingly precipitous dropoff that yawned to his left.

Twice during the ascent the captain signaled a break so he and LaForge could catch their breath. Both officers were in excellent physical shape, but the heat and the thin air were taking a toll. Each time, they had to step aside to allow Vulcans to pass them. Even the oldest of the Vulcans climbed tirelessly and without pause. Picard was reminded forcibly of Vulcan superior strength.

Yes, indeed, he thought, recalling his conversation with Admiral Brackett, the *Romulan invasion force would have had its hands full with these people*...

He found himself wishing that Ambassador Spock had accompanied him back to Vulcan, even briefly, to attend the service, but he knew that the danger of crossing the Neutral Zone made that notion impossible. Still, it would have meant a lot to Sarek to have his son present today.

Thinking of Spock's stormy relationship with Sarek made Picard recall his own father, dead now many years. He and Maurice had never gotten along, either. Picard's father had strongly disapproved of Starfleet and all advanced technology. He'd wanted his son, Jean-Luc, to stay home in LaBarre and tend the family vineyards. He'd been quite vocal in his displeasure when Jean-Luc had disobeyed him and entered Starfleet Academy.

Picard frowned as he pushed himself to keep climbing. Last year, he'd had a very strange vision when his artificial heart had failed, and he'd actually "died" for a few minutes, until Beverly had managed to resuscitate him. During his "death" he'd imagined that Q was there in the afterlife, tormenting him. Q had produced an image of Maurice Picard,

and once again Jean-Luc had been forced to relive how he'd disappointed his father.

Even after all those years, remembering the day he'd told his father of his decision still had the power to make Jean-Luc Picard's jaw clench, his mouth tighten.

I am sorry I was a disappointment to you, he thought, remembering his father's craggy features, his accusing stare. *But I made the right decision. Robert took over the vineyards, after all... and he resented it, all these years, he resented it. So would I have, if I had done as you wished, mon père....*

Would it have done any good to explain, to try to talk to his father? Every time he'd tried to talk to Maurice after his admission to Starfleet Academy, there had just been another fight, and the gulf between them had widened still further. *Should I have tried harder? Been more patient?* Picard didn't know. *And now... it is too late. Death is the most final argument of all.*

Picard was wheezing for breath, and Geordi LaForge was in little better shape, when they finally mounted the last step. Picard stepped aside and stood there, trying to catch his breath. He was drenched in sweat.

"Here, Captain, Geordi," Data said, unfastening a small case he wore on his belt. "Dr. Crusher gave me these in case they were needed." With two deft motions, the android pressed the injectors against the officers' arms.

Picard's breathing immediately eased. He smiled at Data and nodded. "Thank you, Commander. I needed that."

"Me, too," Geordi said. "Thanks, Data."

Picard and LaForge, on Crusher's advice, had each carried a small flask of water, and they paused for a moment to drink some. Then, feeling somewhat more alert, Picard gazed at the vista before them.

They were at least a thousand meters higher than when they had begun. Mount Seleya's flank had been flattened, here, and paved. Behind them, buried in the bulk of the mountain, was the Hall of Ancient Thought and the quarters of the Vulcan mental adepts.

Before them lay the gathering ground for the crowd. The immediate family, Sarek's closest friends, and the highest-ranked dignitaries would cross that slender tongue of stone to stand in the most sacred spot of all, the amphitheater. Some buried part of Sarek's memories told Picard that amphitheater was where Spock's re-fusion had taken place, seven, almost eight decades ago.

"Where should we stand, Captain?" Data asked.

"Well, we're not part of the family," Picard said. He squinted into the setting sun. "How about over there, not far from the Legaran tank? We should be able to see the proceedings from there."

The three officers began making their way over toward the Legaran tank. Picard could see a faint shimmer above the tank and on each side, and realized that the Legarans' special environment must be protected by an energy field. Otherwise, the tank would give off so much heat that it would be like standing in an oven.

As Picard made his way through the crowd, he inadvert-

tently brushed against one of the robed Vulcans. Knowing that Vulcans were touch-telepaths, the captain halted and turned to face the person he'd bumped. "My apologies—"

The tall young Vulcan facing him was staring at him intently, and then recognition dawned for both of them at the same time.

"Captain Picard."

"Sakath!"

Last year, the Vulcan had accompanied Ambassador Sarek during his last mission to complete the negotiations with the Legarans. Sakath had tried and failed to keep Sarek's uncontrolled emotions, a result of the *Bendii Syndrome*, in check. Violent altercations had begun erupting all over the *Enterprise* after crew members had been exposed to Sarek's inadvertent telepathic broadcasts of his rising emotions.

When a mind-meld had proved necessary to complete the negotiations, it had been Picard, with his experience in diplomacy, who had volunteered to share his mind with Sarek, to allow the Vulcan ambassador to "borrow" his own emotional control.

Now, a year later, Picard studied Sakath, seeing that his features seemed drawn, thinner. Sakath had aged far more than a year. "I'm glad to see you, Sakath," Picard said, nodding to LaForge and Data and motioning the Vulcan aside so they could speak in private. "How have you been?"

The Vulcan inclined his head gravely. "I am well, Captain," he said. "I am...gratified that you could attend today."

"So am I," Picard said. "It seemed fitting."

"Indeed," Sakath said. "Sarek spoke of you many times this past year, Captain, during his increasingly infrequent lucid moments. He was very grateful to you for helping him complete his final mission."

"You...cared...for Sarek during his final illness?" Picard said, marveling a little. He could only imagine how painful it would have been for a Vulcan to be constantly assaulted by Sarek's emotional storms.

"Perrin and I attended to him," Sakath said. "It was all I could do for him to make up for my inability to help him during the Legaran mission."

"You did your best," Picard reminded him.

"But, Captain, it was you who mind-melded with him, not I," Sakath said. "I should have been strong enough to do that...and I was not. I failed him."

"Nonsense," Picard said. "We discussed that at the time, and you would have been risking your health and sanity to undertake that meld. Humans are far more equipped to handle violent emotions than Vulcans."

"True," Sakath admitted. He regarded Picard intently, then did something no Vulcan had ever done before in the captain's experience—he held out his hand, human-style. "I will always be grateful to you, nevertheless, Captain Picard."

Hesitantly, Jean-Luc held out his own hand, and felt the young Vulcan's hot flesh grasp his own. Vulcans had a higher body temperature than humans. Gravely, they shook hands, and, as they did so, a fleeting expression crossed the Vulcan's normally impassive features. An expression of...what?

Recognition? Discovery? Picard couldn't be certain.

"Captain," Sakath said in soft tones that held a note of urgency. "You must come with me. Perrin will wish to see you."

Picard realized from the direction of Sakath's gaze that he was proposing to lead him across the bridge, to the section reserved for family and close friends. "I don't want to intrude," Picard said. "I can see her after the service."

"No," Sakath said, and there was no mistaking the tension in his voice. "You must come, Captain. It is necessary...that is, proper...that you be there."

"Well, I..." Picard hesitated. "Let me speak to my officers," he said.

Sakath nodded, and followed him back to where Geordi and Data were waiting, not far from the Legaran's tank. "Ten sure you both recall Sakath, Sarek's aide," Picard said, and the officers and the Vulcan exchanged greetings.

Picard explained that he was going to go and speak with Perrin, and would be back after the service. He turned away, ready to follow Sakath, but he'd only gone a few steps when Geordi LaForge caught up to him. "Captain!"

Picard swung around. "What is it?"

"Sir...you warned us to keep an eye out for potential problems with security..." Geordi said softly, keeping his voice low. "I think we have one." The Chief Engineer nodded over at a Vulcan who stood not far from them, wearing the typical homespun Vulcan robe that so many of his people favored. "Does that man over there appear to you to be a typical Vulcan?"

"Yes," Picard said. "Why?"

"Well, he's not," LaForge said, still speaking in low tones. "His temperature is three degrees cooler than the lowest temperature for a normal Vulcan."

Picard frowned. "What does that mean? That he's ill?"

"I don't think so, sir," LaForge said. "I think he's a Romulan. I've seen Romulans before, and his heat patterns match theirs exactly."

The captain knew how easily a Romulan could be altered to visually pass as a Vulcan. The two species shared a common genetic heritage, after all, and looked very similar. If Beverly Crusher could easily disguise Picard to pass as a Romulan, as she had done during the captain's latest mission, how much easier would it be to disguise a Romulan to appear as a Vulcan?

"In this crowd of Vulcans, he sticks out like a sore thumb in my VISOR," LaForge added.

"I see," Picard murmured. "A Romulan. It's difficult not to imagine he's here for some ulterior purpose. Why else would he disguise himself? He could be a saboteur or an assassin. The place is certainly ripe with targets...." The captain thought fast. "We need to question him, verify his identity. You and Commander Data circle around and get behind him in case he resists. Sakath and I will approach from the front. We shall accost him as quietly as possible. If he is here legitimately, he'll be able to prove it. If he's not..."

"Right, Captain," LaForge said, and gestured to the android.

Picard and Sakath waited until the two officers were in position; then they moved forward purposefully. The "Vulcan" looked over, saw the Starfleet uniform coming, and turned to bolt back toward the steps.

Data and Geordi grabbed him before he had gone more than a meter or two, however. He struggled briefly, but uselessly. Data's grip was inexorable.

Sakath motioned two of the temple guards to come over and restrain the Romulan. "Search him," Picard ordered.

Quickly, efficiently, the two officers searched the Romulan. "He is unarmed, Captain," Data said.

Picard faced the man, and his last doubts that he was an innocent Vulcan died. He stood facing them, eyes defiant, and his expression was filled with emotion that no proper Vulcan would ever have permitted. "Who are you?" the captain demanded. "Why did you come here?"

The Romulan faced him in silence. Picard glanced at Sakath. "We must discover what his mission was," he said. "If he managed to smuggle a bomb up here..."

"Agreed," Sakath said. He flexed his fingers. "I believe I can discover his intentions."

As Sakath started purposefully toward the Romulan, the man suddenly erupted into violent motion, catching the two Vulcans holding him by surprise. Lashing out with hands and feet, he managed to pull away from the guards. They sprang after him, blocking his escape.

But escape was not his intent.

As Picard stood staring in horror, the Romulan turned, sprinted the few meters to the edge of the cliff, and leaped off. Picard was frozen with shock. The saboteur's action had been so fast, accomplished in such deadly silence, that it was as though he had never been.

Recovering himself, the captain glanced over at Sakath, saw the Vulcan's eyes narrow with concern. "The question is, Captain, did he accomplish his mission...whatever it was?"

"We should evacuate the area," Picard urged.

"The ceremony will begin in just a few minutes, Captain! We cannot evacuate everyone quickly."

Picard knew the Vulcan was right. *We can heat them up*, he thought, assessing his options.

LaForge came over, looking a bit shaken. "Captain, if only I had been quicker..."

"We've all seen what Romulans will do to avoid capture," Picard said. "Don't blame yourself, Mr. LaForge." He glanced around at the Vulcan guards, heard Sakath giving them orders to conduct a quick sensor sweep of the area, to make sure the Romulan had not managed to smuggle in a bomb.

"Mr. LaForge, where *exactly* was the Romulan standing when you first noticed him?"

LaForge indicated the Legaran tank. "Right over there, Captain. He—" He tensed. "Captain! I think I know what he did! The temperature of the Legaran's tank is down to one hundred twenty degrees!"

Picard, Data, and the chief engineer moved hastily through the crowd until they reached the environmental controls of the Legaran delegation's tank. Picard found himself thinking how ironic it was that these beings could actually die of hypothermia in temperatures that would boil a human alive.

Geordi pried off the panel and took a look inside at the controls. "Captain, have Lieutenant Phibbs beam down with a portable energy field generator, and a heating unit, plus my tools. And we'll need Dr. Crusher to check out the Legarans themselves."

Picard nodded and tapped his comm badge. "Picard to *Enterprise*," he said crisply.

Moments later Geordi was busy, with Phibbs and Data help, replacing the smashed environmental control unit for the Legarans' tank. Picard heard the whine of a transporter beam again, and Doctor Beverly Crusher materialized, dressed in a protective environmental suit.

Cautiously, Picard and Crusher stepped to the front of the Legarans' tank and peered in through the narrow viewing orifice in the field. Picard had never actually seen a Legaran.

The four creatures huddled together shivering in the center of the tank resembled a nightmare cross between an Earth mud puppy and a Regulan bloodworm. But they stared back at Picard with huge, anxious eyes, and he knew that, despite their appearance, these were decent people who had come to honor Sarek—and almost paid for their gesture with their lives.

"I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard. A Romulan saboteur damaged your tank's controls, but we are restoring them," Picard said, hoping they would understand him. During the negotiations aboard the *Enterprise*, the Legaran delegation had understood Standard English. "Our doctor is here, and she has prepared a hypospray for each of you that will help you until your tank is again at the proper temperature. Can you understand me?"

The foremost of the shivering beings slowly nodded its wrinkled, spotted and fringed head. Its jaws opened, revealing large, squishy yellow teeth. A computer-generated voice spoke. "Yes, Captain Picard. I am"—an incomprehensible hiss emerged—"Minister of State. I understand your language."

"Good, Minister," Picard said. "Hold on. We're doing our best to help."

After deactivating a portion of the protective field, Picard helped Crusher over the lip of the tank, and held his breath as the suited doctor waded through the multicolored bubbling slime. Her injector hissed four times, and the violent trembling of the four beings slowly eased.

Picard glanced over at Geordi. "We're almost done here, Captain," the chief engineer reported.

"Excellent, Mr. LaForge," Picard said, thinking that he should put the chief engineer in for a commendation. He

Moments later Geordi replaced the smashed control unit for the Legarans.

and his VISOR had saved the Legarians' lives.

The captain helped Crusher back over the lip of the tank; then the doctor began monitoring the Legarians with her med-scanner. She nodded reassuringly at Picard, and her voice issued from inside the suit's external speaker. "Hypothermia has been averted. They should be fine in a few minutes."

"Captain Picard..." the Legarian minister spoke again. "You say it was a Romulan who attempted to murder us?"

"Yes," Picard said. "My chief engineer spotted him. But he chose to leap to his death rather than face interrogation."

"Why would the Romulans want to kill the Legarians?" Beverly Crusher asked.

"Because Legara IV is located in a very critical area of space," Sakath, who had been standing there in silence, spoke up. "The planet lies midway between Cardassian space and the Romulan Neutral Zone. Legara IV is one of the primary sources for veloniun, which is used in warp-core shielding. The Romulans are eager to annex Legara IV...but in order to do so, they would first have to drive a wedge between Legara and the Federation. The murder of their delegation at an important diplomatic function would certainly accomplish that goal."

Picard nodded at Sakath's analysis. "And undo Sarek's ninety-three years of work," he said, feeling a surge of anger at the nameless Romulan.

"We understand," came the toneless voice of the Legarian official. "This is not the first time enemies of the Federation have sought to harm our people. And, Captain Picard...we thank you for your help."

"Oh, you're most welcome," Picard said. "I only regret that you experienced any discomfort."

The Legarian minister blinked his huge eyes. "And now...may we ask you to withdraw, Captain? Your clothing is not all proper for conversation, and it is painful to us to converse with a being not properly attired for interspecies interaction."

Picard was taken aback, until he remembered how protocol-conscious the Legarians were. "I understand," he said. "My apologies if my attire offended you, Minister."

"Under the circumstances, we are willing to overlook it, Captain," said the being graciously.

Picard beat a hasty retreat from the tank's viewing orifice.

Sakath touched his sleeve. "It is time for the memorial service to begin," he said. "Can your crew manage without you?"

Picard hesitated, glanced at LaForge and Data. "We're up and running again, Captain," the chief engineer said. "I'll just stay here and monitor the tank as it heads back up."

"And I'll monitor the Legarians," Crusher said. "Go, Jean-Luc. Don't keep them waiting."

"Very well," Picard said, and followed Sakath.

They walked single file across the tongue of stone. Picard

gazed out across the seemingly bottomless gulf, thinking of the Romulan, wondering what it would be like to fall...and fall...

When they reached the amphitheater, the crowd was small. Picard saw Perrin, Sarek's human wife, almost immediately. She was standing there, wearing Vulcan garb as was her custom, a long white robe, very plain. A white cloth held her blonde hair back from her features. Picard had seen her just days ago, but he was saddened to see what a difference only a few days had made. Exhaustion and grief had deepened the lines on her face, until she appeared twenty years older than the woman he had known. Picard knew from Sarek's mind that she had truly loved and revered her husband.

Sakath led Picard up to Perrin. Her eyes widened when she saw the captain. "Jean-Luc!"

Picard took her hand, bowed over it. "Please accept my condolences, Perrin. We have all lost...so much."

She regarded him for a long moment, then nodded. "Yes, we have, Jean-Luc. He would be glad that you are here. Please...stand with us."

Picard took his place on her left side, and Sakath stood to her right.

As the hovering sun touched the horizon, a Vulcan priest struck a huge gong. The sound reverberated out into the distance, and all conversation ceased.

A tall, stern-looking Vulcan of middle years walked out into the center of the amphitheater, flanked by two acolytes. Picard realized this must be the current High Master. His voice rang out into the stillness. "Today we honor the memory of Sarek of Vulcan, son of S'Kor, son of S'Kor. Sarek served our world capably for his entire adult life. We respect and honor him today as one who helped Vulcan forge strong ties with the Federation. The President of the Federation has asked to be allowed to speak, and I call upon her at this time."

The Federation President, a Tellarite female, stepped forward. "Sarek of Vulcan. What can we say about this person? He was a strong friend, an obdurate foe, and a champion of galactic peace. Today we are all the poorer for his loss. I will miss him, miss our clashes as well as our unity. Madame Sarek, in the words of your adopted people...today I grieve with thee."

The High Master nodded at the Federation President, then at Perrin. "It is time for the family members to speak."

Perrin took a step forward. "I am all the family that Sarek had left," she said, her voice husky but strong. She spoke in English, but her speech patterns had a Vulcan cadence to them. "Sarek's son chose to forsake his father and forsake Vulcan...because, as you can all see, Spock is not here today."

Picard remembered that Perrin and Spock had never gotten along. Perrin felt that Spock's political views during the Cardassian conflicts had constituted a betrayal of his

"Please accept my condolences, Perrin. We have all lost...so much."

father. "I am very protective of my husband, Captain," she'd said once. "I do not apologize for it."

The captain took a deep breath, feeling rather light-headed. *I must need another dose of tri-ox*, he thought.

Perrin fell silent, obviously struggling for control. All those years on Vulcan had taught her something, because a moment later, she spoke again, her voice shaking but understandable. "My husband was a great man, and we will never again see his like. The galaxy has lost...much. I miss him, and I mourn him...I will always mourn him. Grieve with me, my friends, for Sarek is...gone."

She made a slight, all-inclusive gesture, then bowed her head.

Picard blinked in confusion, realizing that he had taken a step forward so that he again stood shoulder to shoulder with Perrin. She glanced over at him, plainly surprised. The captain felt his mouth opening, heard himself speak in a voice that was not his own—in fluent Vulcan.

The faces of the crowd registered surprise and, in Perrin's case, utter shock.

Even though Picard did not understand or speak Vulcan, the words he was speaking resonated within him, and he knew their meaning:

"Greetings. I am Spock, son of Sarek, son of Sorkon. My words come from the mouth of my father's and my friend, Captain Picard of the starship *Enterprise*. It is not possible for me to be with you today to honor my father. I am far away on a mission to promote galactic peace. My mission honors my father's memory. Sarek and I often did not agree. Everyone knows that. And yet...he is the reason I am where I am today."

Even as Picard spoke, the words coming readily to his lips, his mind flashed back to the last moments of the meld with Spock. Now he recalled the Vulcan's unspoken question and his own wordless assent: Spock's final message had been implanted on such a deep subconscious level that it had stayed buried in his mind until the proper moment.

Even the normally stoic Vulcans reacted visibly to Picard's words, with varying degrees of surprise. Perrin was staring at Picard, shock and anger plain on her aristocratic features.

Picard realized that the crowd was hearing him speak in Spock's voice. *He wanted to be here, but knew it was impossible. So he chose the only way to speak at his father's memorial...*

"I honor my father. In life, I respected him. Sarek taught me a great deal. He taught me to revere Infinite Diversity In Infinite Combinations. He taught me that peace was the best way. He taught me to be strong, to face my duty unswervingly...and that is what I am doing."

Picard took a deep breath, realizing his mouth and throat felt strange from shaping those alien words.

"I do not know if I shall ever be able to return to Vulcan. I am working for peace, teaching the Vulcan way...the way of Sarek. The way of Sarek."

Picard felt tears sting his eyes as Spock's words made him remember his own conflicts with his father. "Goodbye, my

father. Your struggle is over. May you find peace where you are, and may I help bring about peace where I am. I shall miss you always, and I grieve that you and I will never look upon each other again. Farewell, Sarek."

Picard fell silent.

Perrin gazed at the captain, and Picard could tell that she was angry—whether at him or at Spock, he could not say.

Then Sarek stepped forward. "As the Keeper of the *Katra*, I have climbed the steps of Mount Selyea. I have listened to the words of Sarek's wife...and of his son. I shall now convey Sarek's *katra* to the Hall of Ancient Thought, for his final levitating." The ambassador's aide inclined his head slightly, first to Perrin, then to Picard.

Then the young Vulcan turned and walked away, and the crowd of mourners parted before him as he headed out onto the narrow stone bridge.

He knew, Picard realized. When Sarek touched me, somehow he knew, even though I did not, that I was carrying Spock's final message to Sarek. That is why he insisted I stand with the family....

Picard took a deep breath, and then another as he watched the young Vulcan's tall form dwindle away in the gathering darkness. *Fathers and sons...the captain thought. Did Sarek, at last, finally understand his son? Did my father at some point understand—and forgive—me?*

Jean-Luc Picard knew he would never know. And yet...for some reason he felt encouraged, buoyed. A cooling breeze touched his cheek, and he felt at peace.

Night descended upon Vulcan, a night full of stars. ▲



About the author

*A.C. Crispin is the author of the bestselling Star Trek novels *Yesterday's Son*, *Time for Yesterday*, and *The Eyes of the Beholder*. Her hardcover Star Trek novel, *Sarek*, spent five weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. Among her dozen of other publishing credits are numerous original works, including collaborations with Andre Norton, and other novels and novelizations related to media properties, including *Star Wars* and the *Alien Resurrection* film.*

*"Last Words" is her first contribution to *AMAZING STORIES*.*

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*Mark Maxwell's work has been seen in publication and exhibition over much of the surface of the Earth, and even aboard Space Station Mir. This Alabama native has produced artwork for the U.S., Japanese, and European space agencies. His work for organizations such as the National Space Society, the Space Studies Institute, and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum have made his name familiar to almost anyone with an interest in space flight. His paintings appear in many books, magazines, and games in the U.S. and abroad, including several previous issues of *AMAZING STORIES*.*



When the Enterprise encounters a new civilization, both sides are eager to communicate. But are Captain Picard and his crew prepared to receive what the Pelavians are tending?

BY JOHN GREGORY BETANCOURT

Captain's Log, Supplemental

As the *Enterprise* nears the Pelavos star cluster, long-range sensors are detecting signs of an advanced civilization—six planets and ten moons have been terraformed and colonized. Clearly the beings who live here are spacefaring and highly intelligent. Starfleet has directed us to postpone our star-charting assignment in order to make contact with the Pelavians.

Sis," said Commander Data, turning in his seat at the navigator's console. His yellow eyes widened slightly, but Captain Jean-Luc Picard knew it was from programming rather than worry or excitement. "I am picking up a ship on impulse power."

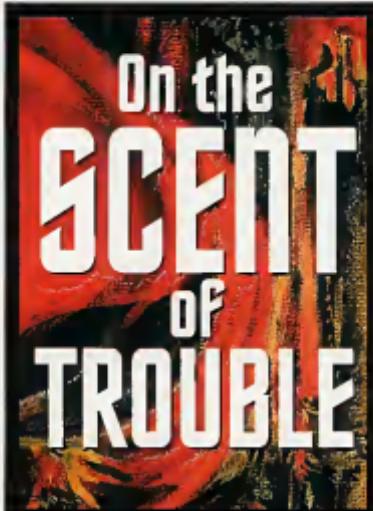
"On screen," Picard said, leaning forward. He felt a familiar rush of excitement at the thought of first contact. No matter how old he became, no matter how many times he did it, encountering an alien species for the first time always excited him. He glanced at his second-in-command, Commander William Riker, who sat to his right. Riker hid it well, but Picard had known him long enough to read below that exterior calm: *He feels the thrill, too.*

"Will it be their first contact?" Riker mused. He scratched his chin through his beard thoughtfully.

"Let's hope so, Number One. We're close enough to the Romulan Neutral Zone that they could have beaten us here decades ago."

"Don't forget the Ferengi," ship's counselor Deanna Troi said from the seat to Picard's left. "They have been active in this area, too."

"Also true." He nodded. The Ferengi had been exploring the galaxy long before the United Federation of Planets came into existence. On several occasions Starfleet ships had encountered new races only to discover the Ferengi had



been there first—pillaging in the name of profit. "Let's hope it goes well."

An image appeared on the viewscreen at the front of the bridge, showing a spherical silver ship with no sign of viewports or openings of any kind. In space, it was often hard to guess the size of an object; you didn't have enough reference points against the greater cosmic vastness. Yet something told Picard—some instinct, some premonition—that this was a small ship, at least as compared to the *Enterprise*.

As though reading his mind, Data said, "The Pelavian vessel is approximately thirty-two meters in diameter. Scanners detect twenty-two life forms on board."

"Distance?" Picard asked.

"Fifteen thousand four hundred ten kilometers," Data said. "And closing."

"Full stop."

"Aye, sir."

Picard leaned forward, studying the ship. What kind of people would leave out viewports? Didn't they want to see the stars?

"Hail them," he said.

A second later, Worf replied, "There is no response, sir."

"What is their weapons status?"

"None that I can detect, sir."

"Are they scanning us?"

Data said, "Apparently not, sir. I am picking up no transmissions of any kind."

"Curious." Picard leaned back on one elbow, considering the situation. No scans, no viewports, no weapons. Clearly this was a most unusual species.

"Their ship contains an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere that should be compatible with our own," Data went on. "Their artificial gravity reads at one-point-oh-six Earth normal."

ILLUSTRATION BY BOB EGGLETON

Beside Picard, Deanna suddenly sat rigidly upright. "I am sensing something!" she said.

"What is it?" Picard asked. Her empathic abilities had saved the *Enterprise* on more than one occasion.

"They are telepaths...very powerful...trying to contact us—"

"Can you talk to them?"

"I am not a telepath, Captain...it's like I am overhearing their thoughts."

He nodded slightly. "What are they saying?"

"I sense confusion from the Pelavians—perhaps because we have not responded to their hails." She paused. "It's hard to understand—wait! I think they sense me!"

Picard said, "Are they reading your thoughts? Can you let them know that we mean them no harm?"

"I am not sure. They do not seem hostile, just confused."

"If possible, ask them to meet with us."

A sudden mew of pain came from Deanna, and her face drained of blood. Her eyes rolled back as she slumped a little in her seat.

"Can't—" she gasped.

"Deanna!" Riker said, leaping to his feet.

Picard raised one hand, restraining him. "Are you all right, Counselor?" he demanded. "Were you telepathically attacked?"

"No." She shook her head almost groggily. "I'm sorry, sir. The Pelavians are...different from other telepaths I have encountered. They use sense-impressions as much as words. Trying to understand it all was too much for me."

"Did you learn anything?" Riker asked.

"They accepted our invitation," she said.

Picard blinked. "Our invitation—"

"To meet with them."

"Sir," said Data. "I believe you should see this."

Picard glanced at the viewscreen. The bottom of the spherical ship had begun to peel back in sections, almost like a flower opening to morning light. A smaller round ship darted out, then began to accelerate toward the *Enterprise*.

"The Pelavian ambassadors are on their way," Deanna said softly. "Their names..." She hesitated. "I don't know how to translate," she said. "Their names are telepathic impressions, somewhere between the scent of chocolate and the texture of cream—that's as close as I can come. It does not translate."

"There are two life forms on board," Data said.

"Prepare Shuttle Bay Two," Picard said. "They can land there, Deanna? Can you convey that?"

"I believe so." She shut her eyes, then a moment later nodded. Picard noticed that she had begun to grow pale again, and her hands shook slightly. Clearly she could not stand prolonged contact with the Pelavians. They would have to use her talent sparingly.

"Deanna?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she whispered. "They understand."

Suddenly her eyes fluttered again and she slumped again. She would have fallen to the deck if he hadn't caught her.

With Riker's help, Picard lifted her back into her seat. Then he tapped his comm badge.

"Picard to sickbay. Send a medical team to the bridge."

Doctor Crusher's voice replied: "On our way. What's the problem?"

"Counselor Trui appears to have fainted."

"I'm all right now..." Deanna said, struggling to pull herself up. "I do not need medical attention."

"Are you certain?" he asked.

"Yes." She sat straighter, massaging her temples. "I just have a headache. I'll be fine. I was overwhelmed by their ah, enthusiasm."

He leaned back. "Very well. Belay that order, Doctor."

"Yes, Jean-Luc—but I still want to look her over."

Deanna said, "As soon as the Pelavian ambassadors are safely aboard, I promise to stop by, Beverly."

"I'll hold you to that, Crusher out."

Riker said, "You mentioned being overwhelmed by their enthusiasm—what does that mean?"

Deanna hesitated. "They think too quickly, too loud, too..." She shrugged helplessly. "I cannot put into words quite what they did. It's kind of like overthinking someone—you would have to be a telepath to truly understand. My mother did it to me a couple of times by accident when I was a child, only the Pelavians are a hundred times more powerful than she is."

"It's almost enough to make me wish your mother were here," Picard said wryly.

Riker gave a wicked grin. "It can be arranged, sir—"

"No, no!" He raised his hands in surrender. "No need to go overboard, Number One. Enthusiastic Pelavians are quite enough for one day." He turned to Data. "How long



until they reach us?"

"Approximately twenty-six minutes at their present speed, sir."

He nodded, rising. Just enough time to get cleaned up and put on his dress uniform. "Very well. You have the bridge, Mr. Worf. Counselor, Mr. Data, Number One—you will join the greeting party. You have twenty minutes to change."

As planned, Captain Picard met Riker, Data, and Deanna Troi in Shuttle Bay Two at the appointed time.

Pulling his long red dress tunic a little straighter, Picard gave an approving nod to each of his senior staff. All looked more than presentable for such an important meeting.

He turned as the shuttle bay's huge double doors began to open, revealing velvety black dotted with stars. A silver sphere glided out of the darkness. As it passed between the shuttle bay's doors, the force field sheltering them from the vacuum of space flickered faintly.

Then the little ship slowly settled onto the flight deck, extending three stabilizing feet for balance. The low hum of its engines faded. A heartbeat later, a front panel dilated open, and Picard found himself gazing into an unlighted chamber. He could just make out some kind of safety webbing, smooth machinery with visible finger-controls, and plenty of handholds.

No viewpoints, he thought, as realization settled in. *No lights. They must be blind.*

"Deanna?" he asked.

"I sense an intense curiosity," she said. "They mean us no harm. That much is clear."

Just as he had expected. "Good."

Slowly two aliens stepped out of their shuttle. Both were short and thickly built, with stubby legs that ended in rounded white pads almost like an elephant's. Their three-fingered hands were small and delicate. A fine white fur covered their elongated torsos. They had small, perfectly round heads—but without eyes, ears, or nose. Tiny puckered mouths stood out from their faces on small fleshy stalks. Other than that, they had no sensory organs of any kind that he could see. Then he spotted a slight flutter of movement on their chests beneath the white fur. He tried not to stare at a line of tiny slitted gill-like openings almost hidden there.

But he could smell them: Soft, almost musky scents tickled his nose, something like fresh corn mingled with vanilla and caraway, then sulfur and coffee and something sweeter than honey. It made his head swim.

"They are making sounds far above the range of human hearing," Data whispered. "But I am unable to discern any linguistic pattern. May I proceed with my scan?"

"Surreptitiously, Mr. Data."

"Of course, sir."

Ten seconds had passed with no action on either side. It was time to get things moving. And, as host, clearly it was up to Picard to take the initiative.

He stepped forward. "I am captain Jean-Luc Picard of the United Federation of Planets," he said firmly. "I wish to welcome you aboard the *Enterprise*."

Both Pelavians hopped back away from him. Their arms flapped frantically. He heard a faint, high-pitched squeal.

"Too loud," Deanna whispered. "I feel their shock and pain and disorientation."

DATA surreptitiously raised a medical tricorder and began a scan of their bodies. "They are like no other race we have encountered before," he said softly. "I cannot identify the functions of many of their internal organs. But they have what appears to be a highly developed echolocation system."

"Like bats?" Riker said.

"Exactly. They send out sound waves to map the area around them. They have no eyes as we understand them."

YOU ARE PRIME?

The words suddenly filled Picard's head, driving out all other thoughts. *Sulfur, the texture of clay, a taste like copper on the back of the tongue.* He opened his mouth. Light flashed behind his eyes. He felt drunk and disoriented, as if he stood in many places at once and saw himself as a warm shape through his *thbok*-senses.

Thbok-sense?

And abruptly the presence waned like a receding tide. It left him confused and gasping like a fish out of water.

He realized his officers were staring at him curiously.

"Sir?" Riker asked. "Are you all right?"

"They touched your mind," Deanna said. "I felt it, too."

"Yes," he said softly. He blinked and tried to put his words in order. Slowly he looked at the Pelavians. Something still tickled at the back of his head, and he suspected they were reading his surface thoughts.

Yes, I am the commander here. He thought the words clearly, wondering if they could pick them up. *No wonder Deanna became overwhelmed.* He hadn't been able to hold a coherent thought while they were in his head.

WE GREET YOU, PRIME;

This time the words came more softly, as though they understood the problem and held back in their contact. The words mingled with tastes and smells and sense-impressions, so many and so fast that he could not quite follow them. Their thought-language was as rich with texture as any he had ever encountered, and he rapidly realized that he must be grasping only a tiny part of their mental dialogue.

"Welcome aboard the *Enterprise*," he said, thinking the words as precisely as he spoke them. "We are pleased whenever we encounter a new people."

He caught a scent of fresh-mown hay, and the sense came to him that the Pelavians, too, were pleased. They seemed to almost glow with happiness.

WE ARE NOT ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE;

"No," he said quickly. Apparently this was a true first contact. "Many different peoples live throughout our galaxy."

TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR WORLDS;

To Picard's satisfaction, things moved smoothly after that. After relating as much of the history of the United Federation of Planets as seemed appropriate, he led the Pelavians on a tour of his ship, beginning with the shuttle bays. They touched his mind briefly whenever they had questions, and he answered them verbally, knowing they could read his thoughts. This system of communication seemed to work quite well.

As the tour progressed, he made certain he stood close to them, breathing in the sweet scents they seemed to exude so readily. Vanilla mingled with wild berries, Arcturan honeycombs tinged with lilac and rosemary—so many different scents.

When they entered engineering, the two Pelavians stood before the warp core. They remained silent, examining it with senses that Picard could not begin to guess at.

His other officers gathered around for a quick conference, and Geordi LaForge hurried over to join them.

"Is there anything I can do to help with your guests?" the chief engineer asked a little hesitantly. "They seem a little, well, hard to reach."

"Let me handle them," Picard said. This was his tour, and he had no intention of letting his crew steal the glory. The Pelavians were his.

"My assessment of their physiology is done, sir," Data said. "They are communicating with each other not only telepathically, but through sensory emitters in their gills, which release streams of complex airborne chemicals."

"Airborne chemicals?" Riker said, frowning.

"Those smells—" Deanna said.

Data looked at her blankly. "Smells?"

"Yes," Picard said. It all clicked together. He knew exactly what Deanna meant. "Whenever they touched my mind, I smelled something. Usually something sweet."

Data said, "The chemicals do not remain in the air, but break down fairly quickly. I believe they are designed to enhance telepathic communications—a chemical 'body language,' if you will."

"Interesting," Riker said. "I don't think I have ever heard of a species that uses scent for communication."

"Most species, including humans, use scent to enhance communications," Data said. "Consider your own pheromones, sir. They tell women when you are sexually attracted to them."

"Ex...yes," Riker said. Picard thought he was a little embarrassed by the comment. "Pheromones, right."

Picard glanced at the Pelavians. *I need to get back to them. And I need to get rid of the others.*

To Riker, he said, "I'll finish from here, Number One. You may return to your duties."

"Very good, sir," Riker said, a trifle too slowly for Picard's liking. "I'll be on the bridge if you need me."

I'll make sure I don't, Number One, Picard thought. He no longer wanted Riker around, but he couldn't quite say why. *He's always been insolent. Always been after my ship and my command.*

"And I should see Doctor Crusher," Deanna Troi said. "I promised her I would stop in. I still don't feel completely well."

Picard nodded. "Do so. Take your time. I can handle the Pelavians myself." That would be best. He could keep them for himself and not have to worry about the others stabbing him in the back.

"Very well, sir."

"Shall I continue to accompany you?" Data asked. "My duty shift is up now, but I would appreciate the opportunity to study them."

Picard narrowed his eyes. Data was another one he had to watch, he thought. All that android precision...it would be easy for Data to steal his command.

"No," he said. "Why don't you begin an analysis of the Pelavians' scent-communication? Perhaps you can adapt the universal translator to use it."

"An intriguing idea, sir. If I could enlist Geordi's assistance?"

"By all means," Picard said. That would keep them both busy. Too busy to interfere with him.

He rejoined the Pelavians. "Shall we continue our tour?" he asked.

In the way to the turbolift, Commander Riker sagged against the wall. His eyes ached. His head ached. He felt sick and nervous and jittery all at once.

Then the walls began to melt around him, flowing like molten plastic, down, down, down. He gaped. He blinked.

And just as suddenly it was gone. Two ensigns had paused to stare at him.

"Are you all right, sir?" one asked.

"Yes," he snapped back. "You're not getting my job that way, Ensign Parker!"

Straightening, he ran down the hall for the turbolift. *They won't stop me,* he thought. *Nobody can stop me.*

Sickbay, Deanna Troi told the turbolift.

It whisked her toward the proper deck. But when the doors opened, she stepped out into a garden. Flowers grew everywhere. She stared, as they began to move, vines writhing and tangling, stalks twisting, flowers opening like mouths and snapping at her—

And just as suddenly they were gone. She leaned against the wall for a second, pressing her eyes closed. *I really have been working too hard,* she thought. Stress and the Pelavians had taken their toll.

vians—that had to be the answer. Just to make sure, she'd tell Beverly about it. She didn't think there would be a medical cause, but it wouldn't hurt to find out.

Shaking her head, she hurried toward sickbay.

These are the plasma ducts," Captain Picard said. "They channel raw plasma to the reactor core."

He sensed slight puzzlement from his guests, but did not elaborate on the matter/antimatter fusion process. Some things had to be kept secret, after all.

All around him, LaForge's engineers were staring. They looked back at their work as soon as he turned his head, but he could *feel* them staring. Data and LaForge busied themselves at one of the workstations, and they seemed intent on equipping a portable universal translator with some kind of sensor panel.

The walls wavered.

I'm hallucinating, he thought. But now the Pelavians were looking at him again, and he knew he would have to keep them moving, keep them distracted, or they might begin to suspect. After all, who could he trust to take over the tour? Not Riker—not Data or Worf or Deanna Troi. *Nobody*. He was alone in his command. Riker was after the *Enterprise*. Picard narrowed his eyes. He had never trusted Riker. In fact, his whole senior staff was out to get him. He'd have to carry on by himself. He was the only one he could trust.

We are done here, Prime?

"Yes...yes," he said. The scent of charcoal and apple cider surrounded him. "We will see the ship's astrogation labs next."

He hesitated, glancing sidelong at Data and LaForge, who were still pretending to ignore him. He knew they were eavesdropping on every word he said, though. *They want me dead. I need protection.*

Protection—why hadn't he thought of it before? He smiled grimly to himself, then tapped his comm badge.

"Picard to Worf. Have a security team meet me in engineering on the double."

"Aye, sir," Worf said. "Is something wrong?"

"No!"

Worf—he was another one. Always scowling, angry, afraid. *I'll have to watch him, too.*

"Picard out!" he said.

Are you well? the Pelavians asked in his mind.

"Yes!" he snapped, mentally and verbally. He glanced around. Everyone was staring at him now, and they made no pretense of hiding it.

"Sir!" said a man's voice from behind him. "Ensigns Ordover and DeCandido reporting for duty!"

Picard jumped a bit, then whirled. Two men stood there stiffly, awaiting his orders.

"Fall in behind our guests," he said. "Watch for assassins."

"Assassins?" Ordover said. "Sir—do you think—"

"Just follow orders, Ensign."

Turning, he stalked toward the door. The Pelavians followed, bringing the scent of cedar chips and cinnamon.

Dr. Beverly Crusher brushed back her hair with one hand as she raised the medical scanner over Deanna Troi's forehead. It whirred faintly.

"I don't see anything that could cause hallucinations," she said, frowning a bit. "I'm showing slightly elevated adrenaline levels, but that's not very unusual."

Deanna sat up, smoothing her dress. "So what caused my hallucination?"

Dr. Crusher sighed. "You fainted on the bridge. Perhaps telepathic contact with the Pelavians had something to do with it. I don't know what else it could be at this point. Let me know if it happens again."

The walls tilted. Captain Picard felt as though he were walking up the side of a mountain, into a stiff wind, surrounded by the scents of pine and boiling cabbage. *Not much farther*, he told himself, touching the wall to keep his balance. *Only a few steps more.*

A door slid open and Deanna Troi lunged out at him. Picard drew up short, staring. *She's up to something.*

"Captain," she said, "are you all right? You don't look well. You're sweating—"

"I am—fine!" He straightened and tried to ignore the way the deck moved underfoot.

"I sense some emotional turbulence," Deanna said. "I think you should see Doctor Crusher for a checkup. You're at the sickbay, after all—"

"Sickbay?" He took a step back. *What am I doing here? I was heading for astrogation!*

"Sir—"

"I don't need your interference, Counselor! I am perfectly capable of running this ship without your meddling!"

"Sir—I would never interfere in the way you run this ship."

"I know what you're up to! You're trying to subvert my authority so Riker can take over! I know how you feel about him—don't deny it!"

She sighed. "Sir, I once had intimate feelings for Will, but that was a long time ago."

Yes, he saw the whole plot now. "You're relieved of duty. Consider yourself confined to quarters."

"Captain—"

He didn't hear her next words. To his horror, her face began to twitch. Her cheeks bulged, and suddenly black metal sprouted...Borg implants. Her skin sealed over. Her

eyes went dead and black. A device on her right arm whirred.

"We are the Borg," she told him in a cold voice. "Resistance is futile. Put down your weapons and prepare to be assimilated."

"Shoot her!" Picard cried, backpedaling furiously. The Pelavians caught him, squeaking like bats, wrapping him in smells of panic-filled burnt rubber. "Shoot her! She's a Borg!"

The two ensigns leaped forward, phasers drawn, but they did not fire. The room tilted. They stared past the Borg as if they couldn't see it.

"Shoot!" he screamed. "That's an order!"

The Borg that had been Deanna Troi took a step forward. It raised its hand. Picard saw the targeting device attached to it and knew she meant to take him down.

"Fall back!" he shouted. He seized the Pelavians by their arms and hustled them away, up the bucking corridor floor, up a sudden and endless hill. They could take cover in hydroponics, he thought. He could organize the resistance from cover.

As Deanna Troi rode the turbolift to the bridge, she found herself trembling. She had never seen the captain act so...crazed.

A red alert began to sound. Overhead, the red warning light flashed and the klaxon began to blare its familiar *wobob-wobob-wobob*. Then the turbolift's doors whisked open and she stepped out into a scene of panic and chaos.

Worf, at his security station, barked commands to security teams. Data stood at the internal sensors, his hands moving so quickly that they blurred. Only Riker sat perfectly still in the captain's seat, the eye of the storm, watching everyone grimly and listening to their reports.

"Security teams report Deck Eight through Twelve free of Borg infiltration!" Worf called.

"What's going on?" Deanna demanded, joining Riker. "What Borg? The captain started screaming about them outside of sickbay, pointing at me and telling his security escort to shoot. For an instant, I thought they were going to do it, too!"

"The captain did *wobob*?" He stared at her incredulously.

She nodded. "He seemed to think I was Borg. I sensed a great disturbance in him, but he refused to go to sickbay."

Riker frowned, stroking his beard. "That may help explain what's going on—the captain has been reporting Borg presence on four different decks, but internal sensors and security sweeps haven't found any sign of them. Normally I'd think this was some kind of security test, but with the Pelavian ambassadors aboard..."

She nodded. "It doesn't make sense."

The intercom suddenly crackled and the captain's voice boomed: "Get to work changing the phaser modulation! The Borg are on Deck Six! I need more men now!"

"On their way, sir!" Worf said. He quickly dispatched six more men to Deck Six.

Riker sat back. "Clearly it's not a real Borg invasion," he said. "Could it be a telepathic attack? Do you think the Pelavians are testing us, somehow?"

"I don't think so," Deanna said. "The Pelavians are entirely peaceful. They have never contacted any other race...let alone the Borg."

"Nevertheless, I think we would be best served if we got them off the ship. For their own safety, if nothing else."

She nodded. "I think you're right."

"I will take care of it, sir," Data said. He changed to the transporter station, adjusted the controls, and announced, "I have locked onto them. I am beaming them directly to their own ship."

"The Borg have captured the Pelavians!" Picard shouted. "What's going on up there? Report!"

Riker tapped his comm badge. "Riker to Captain Picard. We have beamed the Pelavians back to their ship for their own safety. Please stand by. We are continuing sensor sweeps to locate the Borg."

The captain did not reply.

Riker looked at her. "So what's wrong with him, Deanna? I need answers!"

"Perhaps the captain is hallucinating," Deanna hesitated, remembering the way he had looked at her outside the turbolift. *He didn't see me. He looked right through me.* "Earlier today, after I left the captain in engineering, I suffered a mild hallucination myself. I headed for sickbay, but I found myself in a corridor filled with flowers. It seemed completely real for a second...but then it was gone. Doctor Crusher seemed to think it was due to stress. But now I wonder..."

Riker blanched. "I had a similar episode when I left engineering," he said.

"What happened? More flowers?"

"The walls started to melt. But it only lasted a second. I put it down to stress..."

She nodded. "Perhaps it's related to the overthinking. The Pelavians were in mental contact with Captain Picard and me."

"But not me," Riker said pointedly.

"It might have spilled over to you."

He hesitated. "But it only lasted a second. The captain..."

"Has been around them constantly. And it seems his hallucinations have not only continued, but grown worse."

Riker turned to Data. "Where is the captain now?"

"In hydroponics, sir."

Worf said, "Phasers are being fired there!"

"Is the captain alone?"

"He is accompanied by eighteen security guards."

Riker bit his lip. "Flood the room with anesthetine gas," he said.

"Sir?" Data said.

"You heard me. Do it!"

Data shrugged a little, but did as instructed. Deanna knew what would be happening: the colorless, odorless gas would be flooding into the room, rendering everyone

unconscious within a few seconds.

Riker rose. "You have the bridge, Mr. Data," he said. He tapped his comm badge. "Riker to Doctor Crusher. Please meet me in hydroponics. Bring your medical teams."

Hydroponics was a disaster. As Riker stepped through the doorway, he found himself splashing through pools of spilled nutrients. Tables had been overturned, and phaser burns scarred the walls.

Security officers sprawled everywhere. After a second, he spotted Captain Picard in the corner, behind an overturned planter of Vulcan creepers.

"Captain," he said, bending. A second later, Dr. Crusher joined him. She administered a shot to the captain's neck, and a second later his eyes fluttered open.

"Number One..." he said groggily. "Where am I?"

"In hydroponics, sir." He swallowed. "There was a firefight, so I flooded the room with anesthetizing gas."

Slowly Picard levered himself up to a sitting position. Riker took one arm and Dr. Crusher the other, and together they got him to his feet. He

wincing and touched his head.

"I feel terrible." Then he seemed to remember. "The Borg—"

"Never here." Riker shook his head. "You appeared to be hallucinating. Deanna and I had episodes, too, but ours were brief. We can only guess the Pelvians had something to do with it."

"You beamed them back to their ship?"

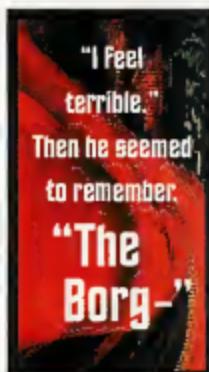
"That's right."

Deanna Troi joined them. "I just spoke with them again," she said. "They are quite confused. I assured them that what happened was unusual—to say the least—and I think they understood."

"Good work, all of you," Picard said. He swayed a little, and Riker steadied his arm. "Now, let's see if we can get to the bottom of this!"

Captain's Log, supplemental

Dr. Crusher's tests proved conclusively that the chemicals that the Pelvians exhale cause hallucinations in humans. They break down fairly quickly in open air, but when they are inhaled, they enter the bloodstream. Prolonged exposure leads to hallucinations and paranoid delusions. Fortunately, Dr. Crusher has already begun work on a solution....



As the shimmering beams of light dissipated, Captain Picard stepped forward to greet the two Pelvian ambassadors standing on the transporter cells. He smiled and extended his arms in greeting. After a second's hesitation, they did the same.

"We greet you, Prime," they thought to him.

"I welcome you once more to the *Enterprise*," he said. His voice sounded a little stuffy, he thought, due to the special nose filters Dr. Crusher had designed to remove the airborne chemicals. "I assure you, this time our meeting will not be interrupted."

"You are well now?"

"Yes, thank you. Shall we continue our tour?"

Turning, he started for sickbay. "Our chief medical officer was able to discover the cause of our problems through computer simulations..." he began. As the Pelvians read his thoughts, he thought he sensed a deep fascination in them.

Yes, this seemed like a good start to the relationship between their peoples. *A successful first contact. I like the smell of this*, he thought with a smile. □

About the author

*John Gregory Betancourt is well known to Star Trek readers. He has published two Deep Space Nine novels—*Devil in the Sky*, written with Greg Cox, and *The Heart of the Warrior*—and one *Voyager* novel, *Incident at Arbusk*. In 1999 his first *Next Generation* novel, *Double Helix: Infection*, will kick off a six-book epic miniseries.*

He has also published more than a dozen non-Trek books and many short stories and edited a bunch of anthologies. You can find out more about him at www.wildsidepress.com.



About the illustrator

*Bob Eggleton has won the Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist for the last two years in a row and is a three-time runner overall. His work as a cover illustrator and an interior illustrator can be found throughout the science fiction field, on books as well as magazines. He has done several illustrations for *AMAZING Stories* over the years, and is the creator of the image of the *Enterprise* that adorns the cover of this issue of the magazine.*

Amazing facts

"NO ONE WOULD HAVE BELIEVED..." So begins the classic H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds*, which *Amazing Stories* presented as a three-part serial beginning with the August 1927 issue. The dynamic cover art was created by Frank R. Paul, who became known as the dean of science fiction illustrators for his prolific and powerful work in the early years of the magazine.

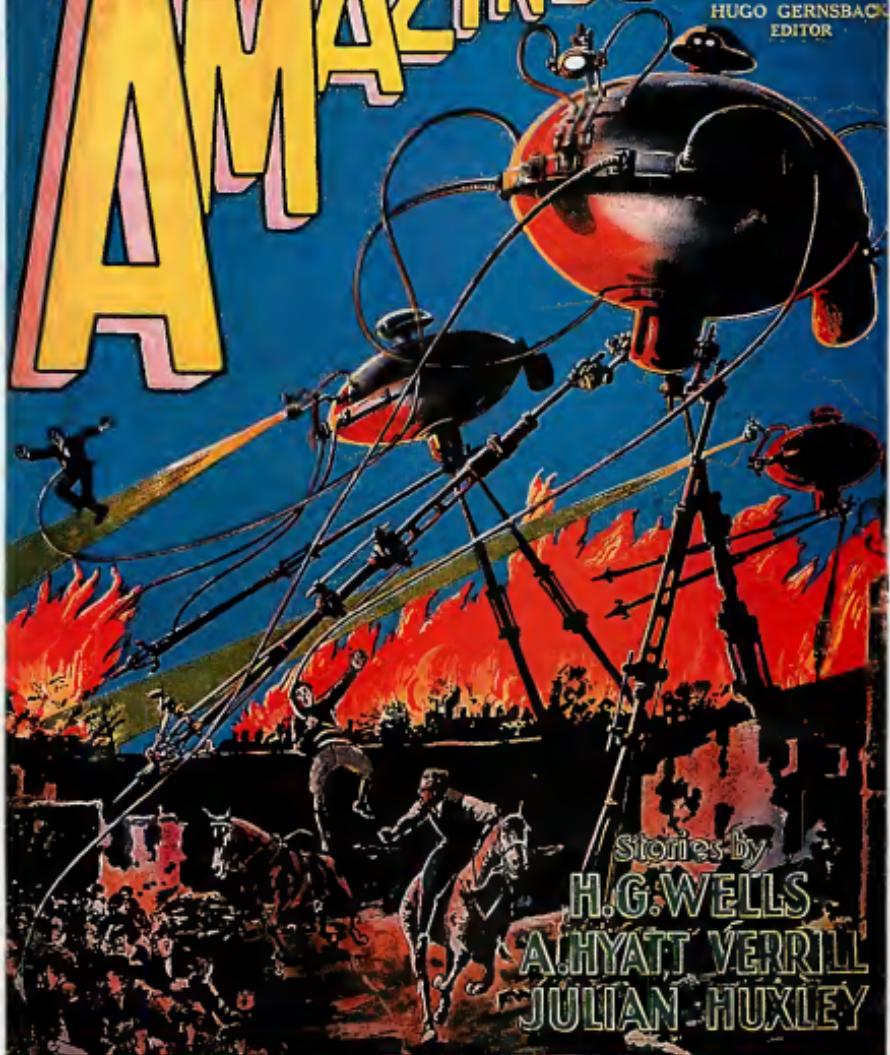
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Here's a roller-coaster tale of musical misadventure, incredibly decadent ice cream, and not-quite-unrequited love. The fate of Earth hangs in the balance, but don't let that worry you.



Pheromitey Gleed!

BY
MICHAEL
LIGLING

They laughed when Land sat down to play the rejil.

They had good reason. Land, a purchased Earthenkind, could not possibly play the instrument—insufficient and insubstantial oral interfaces, of course. "Besides," cLEc grimaced, "I doubt he could carry a tune if his gwag depended on it."

Land chuckled quietly to himself. A lot cLEc knew. Purebred Earthenkind males did not have gwags; at least, not the detectable and functioning ones, though many in the homological sciences refused to give up the search. *And wouldn't that be something if they actually discovered one? Casanova, move over! Don Juan, ship out! bHERb Peter Earth22 Modugno, give up! An Earthenkind with an active gwag is here.*

Despite the physical shortcomings and skepticism, however, Land persevered, and less than two hours from Einstein's Bagels, he turned more than a few heads and assorted other ocular and aural repositories, cLEc's included, with a passable rendition of gORMAN Earth19 Oit's classic, *Art and Sole*.

So the earthensludge lazelizard could play the rejil, after all! The laughter aboard the *Goatgref* turned to appreciative sputtering, chins wet with drool as saliva mists steamed to the evacuation vents above. "Only one of

your caste would be so imprudent as to utilize his armpits and forehead in such a manner," cLEc said—as close to a compliment as Land had ever known a Pyoshuan to get.

TireNE, however, maintained the stereotype. "There is no room for gaiety on a mercy mission," she chided. "Focus. We must focus on the tragedy at hand."

Land did not care. He continued to play, his tongue skipping no more than a beat or two, his thumbs splayed only slightly more tortuously. Having her nearby was satisfaction enough for him.

Lemon-haired and genetically sculpted for ardent coupling, TireNE was the sort of Pyoshuan who drove Earthenkind males into hormonal frenzies. Making matters worse, she was pheromite-positive to Land whereas he was pheromite-negative to her. A not surprising occurrence when recent Earthenkind and born Pyoshuans of opposing genders came together. In an earlier era, the impasse would easily have been alleviated with implants, toilet waters, inhalation therapy, oral dosing, intensive pheromite conditioning, or a virtual sensory bend, but Earth's disastrous satyrus narcosis of the last quarter millennium changed all that. The once-thriving black market in synthetic pheromites had vanished eons ago.

Johnny Bismol Barker Earth4 Land, as his pressnaminate made clear, was four generations removed from Earth habitation. If it had been otherwise, he would have already acquired the male construct of JOHNNY and a name, no doubt, determinately less Earthy, along the lines of cLEc, for instance. As for the mission, it would provide him with his first visit to his

ILLUSTRATION BY MARC GABBANA

ancestral planet. He was hardly the sort inclined toward humanitarianism; his selection had been a right-time-at-the-right-place affair.

Society dictates required at least one purebred humanoid (that is, less than five generations removed) of a specific persuasion on any mercy mission destined to that humanoid's ancestral planet. History had shown that recipients of charity on Third Worlds tended to respond less violently when the charity was perceived to have been distributed by their own. If the mission was to Karkov, a Karkovim would be required on board. To Sierra High in Quadrant 914, an individual whose lineage could be traced without deviation to the aborigines of Sierra High in Quadrant 914—or, as they were called, the Shiqheads. Thus was Johnny Land chosen.

Land was the sole recruit on the manpower rolls who fit the genealogical and physiological criteria. A few years earlier he might have had fierce competition, but the purebred Earth-kind population of Pyoshuan had declined since the turn of the century, most having emigrated to the renewed climes of Heisungß and Mauna Loaf, lured by the surfeit of opportunities that naturally abounded on worlds within blinking distance of the Bagels.

Land was not obliged to accept. There was no coercion, even though it was not a trek an Earth-kind would be likely to initiate on his own. Those who had returned over the decades could be counted in triple digits. Few had been reported to have actually stayed and, according to rumors and sanctioned rhetoric, each of these baffling and ill-conceived decisions was followed without exception by a grisly and wholly irreversible death.

Although Land had nothing better to do for the foreseeable future, and the pay offered was far superior to what he could hope to earn elsewhere, it was the introductory meeting that ultimately convinced him to accept. It was here he first encountered TirenE Earth71 Pyos.

TirenE was a dazzling representative of Pyoshuan's landed aristocracy. Her pheromone exudation was immediate and overwhelming, and Land's eyes remained fixed on her throughout the meeting. He had been hit hard by Pyoshuan women before, but there had always been sufficient social and racial diversity in the environment's pheromone mix to minimize the impact. This was not the case here, however, in the cramped quarters of a poorly ventilated seminar room, where he was the only male Earth-kind present and she the only female Pyoshuan—indeed, the only female who had applied for the mission, period. (These days, women with a penchant for do-gooding tended to range emerging worlds, whereon they could plant the seeds of gender equality—social, biological, or both.) His desire for her swept over him in honeyed waves, building osmotically within. He placed his notepad on his lap to prevent any embarrassment. Another situation where a *gwag* would come in handy. *Turn it on! Turn it off! Turn it up! Turn it down!*

"Care to join me for a bowl of tambu?" he asked her after the meeting.

"Tambu interferes with my sleep," she said, unsmiling and unflattered. "Besides, the attraction you feel for me is anything but mutual. I suggest you sublimate your desires now to minimize any disappointment you are certain to experience. Our

mission is salvation, not salvation."

"But—"

"Goodnight, Johnny Land." *By Pluto's spurs! She knew his name!* She had actually bothered to read the identipatch on his shirt. "An Earth4, yet," she sniffed, her nose magnificently above it all.

So here he was, rebutted once more by the Pyoshuan beauty, a mere twelve weeks after that introductory meeting, and rapidly approaching the point of no return as delineated in the standard mission protocol.

He withdrew his shoulders from the blowholes, raised the rejil above his head and heaved it back into its cradle. "It's just something I've always wanted to play, but never had the chance. I figure I might as well pass my time by learning something worthwhile on this trip." In truth, he had heard the stories of how rejil music aroused Pyoshuan women beyond all reason, with an intensity some compared to that of wild cryojacs attacking biscuits of pink wafer.

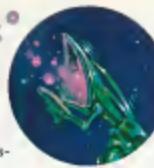
TirenE smiled. It was the first time she had ever smiled at him. Come to think of it, it was the first time he had ever seen her smile. "The crease marks on your forehead make you look like a scab-browed plowboy," she giggled. "You look absolutely idiotic."

Land followed her exit, yearning and speechless as always. *There had to be a way.*

As the travel blurbettes and basal honkers never fail to hammer home, Einstein's Bagels is the first wonder of the modern man-made universe. Rare is the intergalactic sojourner who has not tarried both reluctantly and indulgently at this requisite crossroads of time and space. Rarer still is anyone who can rattle off the original and official name of the Bagels—an acronym-unfriendly mélange of technodrivel bloated with too many syllables and every second letter an unfathomable y or i or s. Suffice it to say that to most early visitors, the celernorts resembled nothing more than a baker's dozen—thirteen golden bagels suspended in space, assorted nodules and antennae like so many poppy seeds besmirching perfect crusts. Each Bagel represented entry to one of the thirteen sectors of the current unforbidden universe. The addition of Einstein was a purely ironic touch. It was blind obedience to the medieval scientist's contribution to the fundamental principles of physics that, in fact, had misled the early space pioneers, delaying practical implementation of the breakthrough for several ultimately deprived generations of eager spacefarers. Be it the silliance, the novelty, or both, the name stuck.

The Bagels revolved in stationary orbits, 48,878 astrolegs from the hub of a rambling architectural catastrophe popularly referred to as the Deli Platter. First a space station. Then a waystation. Then a training base. Then an engineering base. Then a camp for overprivileged youth. Then a celestial warehouse for a manufacturer of fruit-flavored lip balms... And so it grew, unplanned annex following unplanned annex, until an eyesore reminiscent of a poorly catered platter of less than fresh delicatessen fish and cold cuts emerged amid the chaos.

The Platter housed the customs regulatory offices, the twenty-two woefully inadequate Bagel-access encryptoriums, several seedy branch offices of businesses both fly-by-night and



long established, and an eclectic world of diversions rift with entertainment, education and shopping. The latter were especially important, since one could never be certain how long ship encryption or bar-coding might take. Many a holiday getaway had been ruined when the oft-promised three hours expanded to twenty-four or forty-eight or seventy-two.

Bar-coding the vessels was a costly and outdated procedure that had begun centuries before, as the historians claimed, with a plastic tub of herb and garlic cheese dip. Who would have guessed it would become key to interstellar travel? Those wishing to attempt a celerastream without encryption were always welcome to try, of course. In recent years, however, instantaneous implosion and disintegration appealed to very few. An intrepid handful had claimed to have created *barrels* (the Niagara-inspired euphemism for these daredevil craft) sturdy enough to bridge the poasts and sail the streams without encryption, but many a one had survived to reap the sunfire profits.

To quote the reviewer of *Astrostructural Digest* in her contemporary and controversial reassessment of the Bagels, "the tubular avenues of the Platter and the businesses that scar them suggest, more or less, the sorry aftermath of a gang war among rival coteries of failed interior designers, ancient past, recent past, and misguided present." Thus, after a frustrating sweep of the perimeter attractions of said Platter, having elbowed his way through one too many packs of lollygagging travelers, his eyes yet rolling from the garish and uninterrupted clash of texture, style, and color, Land chose to make what he perceived to be profitable use of his layover. Apparent serendipity drew him to Harmonic Melodifiers' Universal and an immersion course titled *Rejil-playing for the Orifice and Extremities Challenged*. With lovely TarenE the quarry, he figured it was worth a second and more valiant try.

"Always the rejil for your sort of sapient. Always a Pyoshean fixation." The teacher was a typically bitter, career-stunted Quivoscer with a wry, sadistic bent, his wrath relative to the ineptitude of the given student.

"...Your tongue, you travesty of genetic gas! The full length. The full length! This is a rejil, not a boondang head! You must thrust. Thrust. Extend it fully before attempting to entwine! Now, both pollicies at once. Pollicies! Your thumbs, you blundering heap of rectal curd! Keep them up. Up. Up. Now, invert. Quickly! Quicker! Listen! Can't you hear the rejil crying? It's crying for you. It's crying to be relieved of the pain you're causing it. Have you no empathy? Listen to its voice. Now, your head, bring it up and through. And blow! I said blow...."

The session traversed a strenuous and harrowing two hours, leaving Land sore and bruised in places he had never been sore or bruised before.

"As earthenshude go, a not unreasonable nor totally untaught effort. Apply yourself to the compositions you've learned today, bridle no agrarian or similarly exotic chords, and most anyone will believe you can actually play the instrument. Unfortunately," the Quivoscer sneered, his bottom-most chain unfurling to his chest, "they will laugh at you nonetheless. The creases the rejil leaves on your forehead cause you to resemble a scab-bowled plowboy, one of the more insipid-looking denizens of our rather pitiful sector of the unforbidden universe."

"So I've been told," Land said.

As he turned to exit, the Quivoscer slapped him playfully on the bum.

"Sorry, friend," Land apologized, "but as far as I know, I've been unequivocal hetero since birth decompression." Only later would he realize he had missed the point entirely.

His hetero passive and the Encryption Update Monitors still showing Encryption In Progress for the *Godsyref*, Land had time left to kill on the Platter. He thought it might be a good idea to find his bearings, but immediately dismissed the effort. Knowing where he stood would make no difference in the scheme of things. When the hetero called, he would be drawn back to the ship from wherever he was—no matter what, no matter when. There would be no other choice. Except for reason of death, no one was ever left behind on Einstein's Bagels on the outbound leg of a mission.

He followed the crowd down a crimson spoke in search of a bar. It wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind, but the holograms of floats and sundries in the window of the E.B. Dairy Bar drew him in.

"Alone, are you?" the waitress asked, contempt oozing through hairy pores, along with the seeming odor of sour milk. Just what Land needed, another Quivoscer.

"Uh-huh," he said with a nod.

Her eyes descended to his toes and returned slowly to his face, assessing her mark, bony zone by bony zone. "I'm not surprised, am I?" she said, and led him to an empty table for eight, set conspicuously upon a platform, a good step up.

He pointed to a smaller table by the washroom door. "Wouldn't that be more appropriate?" he asked.

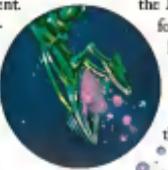
"But then your discomfort wouldn't be so evident, would it? You wouldn't want to deprive our other customers of a little diversion now, would you? Surely you aren't so cruel, are you?" She dragged a chair from under the table and motioned for him to sit. He sat in mid-shrug.

"I just dropped by for a chocolate sundae," he said. "An old-fashioned chocolate sundae like in your window."

The waitress rapped her knuckles against her order slate. "An-old-fashioned-chocolate-sundae-like-in-our-window coming up, isn't it?" She whisked about on uneven heels and vanished behind swinging, dull metallic doors.

Land sucked on his lower lip, staring down at the tabletop, taking in the Bar and its clientele as best he could without making more of a spectacle of himself. It was a family restaurant, frequented primarily by—what else?—Quivoscets. What other group would find his uneasiness so entertaining? He sensed he was the only lone in the place, possibly the only non-Quivoscer, but the mirror on the wall opposite from where he sat reflected otherwise. His eyes met those of a young Earthankind female. She sat in the hidden, lower extension of the L-shaped establishment, alone at an elevated table

for—for—for six, seven—for ten? She acknowledged him with her spoon, raising it to ear level, unaware of the dollop of white cream the action deposited on her straight, dark hair. He turned quickly away. He preferred to stare at attractive females without their staring back. Enthusiastic gurgling erupted





froen the other diners. The humidity rose perceptibly. They were watching his every move, and hers as well. "Turn on your gwag," one shouted. Land forced a smile, a shade too smug perhaps, but no one seemed to care.

He was planning his escape when the waitress returned with his sundae. She placed it before him with the hokey flair of a circus performer eliciting applause. It worked. The diners applauded.

"I don't think this is what I ordered," he said, instantly regretting he had bothered. It was a huge wooden trough supporting an imposing pyramid of assorted scoops—at least a dozen, all buried beneath a galaxy of toppings: strawberries, crushed pineapple, mashed cherries, whole blueberries and raspberries, sliced bananas, chocolate syrup, caramel, gaffa drippings, hot fudge, melted marshmallow, chopped almonds and walnuts, halved pecans, Spanish peanuts in their skins, pondit crunchies, chocolate jimmies, rainbow sprinkles, towering peaks of whipped cream, and a solitary maraschino cherry. "I just wanted a chocolate sundae," he said feebly.

She waved her order slate. "It says right here you asked for the Pig's Dinner and that's what you got, didn't you? Do yourself a favor and the folks watching a favor, will you?" She patted him on the head. "Eat the whole thing and there'll be a reward for you at the end, won't there?"

He ate the cherry first. It was delicious.

The deeper he dug into the trough, the less concerned he became about the people watching, their pointing and their giggling, their whispers and their blabbering. By the third scoop, a decadent and nutty ball of pastel green pistachio, he'd gained sufficient confidence to glance up, and, in the mirror, saw that his female counterpart was doing the same. Their eyes locked kitty-corner, so to speak, and remained this way, as their respective lips and tongues artfully lapped spoonful after spoonful, the spell faltering only as the contents of their troughs ran low and their dips began to come up empty. Although the woman had begun her Dinner before Land, they savored their final spoonfuls as one.

The Pig's Dinner went down easy. Not twelve, but sixteen scoops, as it turned out. Sixteen scoops of the best ice cream Land had ever eaten. All that remained was a milky trickle of chocolate syrup on the bottom of his trough and a cunning jimmie in a corner.

"Congratulations, wouldn't you say?" the waitress said, and pinned a yellow button just above Land's heart. I WAS A PIG AT THE E.B. DAIRY BAR flashed alternately with QUIVOSCET-TOWN, EINSTEIN'S BAGELS.

"I don't wear things like this," Land whined, tugging at the button.

"But that's your reward—your medal for finishing the Dinner, isn't it?" She was grinning a little too proudly for Land's taste, and then he saw that every diner was grinning the same, ears perked for the next bors mots he might utter.

"It's just that I don't like to wear these sorts of things. I never have."

"And that's a fact, is it? Most Earthenkind fight for them, you know? They're highly collectible, you know?"

"Just take it off, please."

She snorted, spotlighting his ignorance. "I can't do that now,

can I? It's a publi-button, isn't it? You won't be able to get it off till you're beyond the Bagels, you know?"

"Come now, they're not so bad," the Earthenkind woman interrupted, her spoon still in hand. It was only then he noticed that she had rounded the corner and crossed the floor. She was shorter than he had expected. "Let's get out of here," she said.

They exited to kind applause and an ulterior "Come again, will you?"

As they channeled themselves into the river of bodies sluicing down the crimson spoke, dodging strollers, stragglers, somnambulistic shoppers, and other hazards of the Platter, Land scrambled for small talk. "I really do hate these publi-buttons," he grumbled, the first topic to surface.

She was worthy to the challenge. "If you hate them so much, why accept them? And why wear one on your butt, of all places?"

"What?"

"You mean you didn't know?" She squatted for a closer read. "HARMONIC MELODIFIERS UNIVERSAL...ADJACENT QUIVOSCET-TOWN, EINSTEIN'S BAGELS."

"Oh, jeez!" said Land.

At a mixed-media crossroads of discordant neon, burnished brass, mother of pearl, and myopic brown-eyed susans with scrofulous yellow petals, they chose the brightest of the boulevards, its infinite storefronts shaded by an equally unrelenting stretch of sky-blue awnings, the expanse of color broken at timely intervals with a cryptic stencil of crisp white that read: 57th Street ReRemembered.

The small talk began to dwindle before she picked it up with "Did you know the only people ever to eat an entire Pig's Dinner are Earthenkind? That's why they give them to us regardless of what we order. The Quivoscents get a kick out of watching us eat."

"I think they get a kick out of watching us do anything. We seem to amuse them."

"That was my second Pig's Dinner, by the way. Wonderful, aren't they? I had my first on my last trip through."

"You come through the Bagels often?"

"Quite a bit, lately."

Beneath the awnings, the small talk grew larger.

Her name was Bonnie and, like Land, she was an Earth4. But that wasn't the only similarity. She was returning from a mercy mission to Earth, the latest of five she had been on.

"What's it like there?" he asked.

"Very hot or very cold. The people are in real bad shape."

He stumbled, falling behind for just a moment. "How bad?"

"The planet's support system is withering by the hour. If it weren't for sentimental reasons, I think we would have given up on Earth a long time ago. I can name a dozen planets that had not deteriorated half as much as when they were cut off."

"It's too bad the last rejuvenation plan failed. I'm sure that could have made a difference."

"My, but you are naive! It was doomed to failure. It was nothing more than a political ploy. Surely you don't believe the effort was sincere?"

"You really know your stuff, don't you? I don't follow politics much."

"The only thing that can make a difference for Earth is a new atmosphere, and nobody has the political will to make that happen. It'd cost a fortune. Besides, take it from me, there's not much worth saving there. You know what Rooted Earthenkind are like? They're animals. Can you imagine what it must have been like when they had weapons?"

"I can't say I've thought about it much. I can't say I've ever really given a lot of thought to Earth at all. When you're an Earthenkind on Pyoshua, you spend most of your time trying to keep up."

She smiled. "And chasing Pyoshuan women, too, from what I hear."

"Yeah," he said with a frown. "But a lot more wanting than getting. They don't make it easy for us to fit in."

"Why stick around, then? Why torture yourself? I've never met a Pyoshuan worth spending time with. I can't stomach the arrogance."

"Get hit with the right pheromite mix, Bonnie, and you'll find you can stomach anything."

"True," she said, her mind suddenly elsewhere. Several moments passed before she spoke again. "I assume, therefore, that you accepted the mercy mission because of a Pyoshuan woman."

The insight stopped Land in his tracks, breaking the stride of the elderly Karkovim behind him, tripping the gent rampantly into the seat of a crushing pedicab.

"Earthensludge," the Karkovim cursed.

"Thanks, mate," called the cabby, flinging a publi-button Land's way. He tried to duck, but it snagged him on the collar. He made no attempt to pull it off. ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, ANYBODY...SPEEDI PEDICABS, EINSTEIN'S BAGELS.

Land drew Bonnie closer, his hands on her shoulders. "How did you know there was a Pyoshuan woman involved?" he asked.

"It's hardly a revelation," she laughed. "You've made it clear you have no political leanings, and you're no philanthropist from what I've seen. I just put two and two together. After all, you're an Earthenkind from Pyoshua. A woman had to be the draw. Besides, Johnny, you're about as shallow as a man can get."

"Want to have sex with me?" he asked, the words leaping from his lips the same instant they came to mind.

She checked her beeper, looked up at the nearest Encryption Update Monitor, and said, "I've been leaning that way ever since my seventh scoop; it was a wonderfully creamy French vanilla."

"I should point out that my attraction is not pheromite driven," he said. "It's really quite low-grade. The source of the appeal seems to lie primarily with your hair, eyes, and modest bosom."

"No need to explain," she replied. "My pheromites are hardly dancing at the prospect of you either. I'm not sure what the appeal is. Perhaps your hands. You hold a spoon with an undeniable elegance. Then again, perhaps not."

They checked into the first Notell Hotel on the block, slipped into the body-length sex jumpers for, as the basal honkers cried, "a squeeze to please without disease," popped their respective made-to-measure doses of fantasy enhancers, and made love as two absolute strangers are wont to do on their first

and intended only encounter.

Land thought of no one but TirenE throughout. For Bonnie, it was a bevy of Rooted Earthenkind.

"Rooted Earthenkind?" Land propped his pillow against the headboard. "You can't be serious."

"Screw the altruism," she admitted. For some inexplicable reason, his shallowness increased her trust in him. "Why else would anyone like you or me accept a mission to that orbiting wad of crud? God! And I've been on five! Do I have to spell it out? It's sex, Johnny! Nothing more than sex. Four times now, I've plotted to stay behind. But the Psycho Wards always get wind of it. The bastards pop me with a coma-jigger and lock me on board till I'm off."

This was more than Land could grasp. "But you're like me, an Earth4? That shouldn't happen. We're safe. We're cleared. We're free to mingle. Our pheromites don't cut it on Earth, and theirs don't cut it with us. There is no attraction. Rooted Earthenkind? Really? You and Rooted Earthenkind?" He felt the Pig's Dinner beginning to rise.

A conspiratorial grin crept across her face. Land slid lower. "Yes, what you say is true of Earth4s, Johnny, but—" She paused, gathering her thoughts, her breath wet and warm at his ear. "If you promise to keep it to yourself, I'll tell you a little secret."

Who in the hell would be telling? It wasn't like they had any mutual acquaintances. Indeed, the vastness of the unforbidden universe ruled out the likelihood almost completely. "I promise," he agreed, sinking deeper into the mattress.

"The truth is," she whispered, "I am Earth4 only on paper."

"What?"

She nodded. "Some hopped-up clerk on Torremolunes messed up our family I.D. Tree. My birth-parents have been trying to get it cleared up for the past three years. My birth-da says we're really Earth8. My real name is BonaY."

"Jeez, Earth8. BonaY?"

"You should see your face," she laughed, making no bid to conceal the ridicule. "Scrunch it up any more and you'll look like a scab-browed plover."

Land shut his eyes. He had always felt that the less he knew about anything or anyone, the better off he was likely to be.

"I saw it as an opportunity. I figured I might as well make the most of it while I could. A mercy mission to Earth sounded like just the right thing, especially since Earth4s are allowed outside. As an Earth8, I'd never get the chance."

"But that's illegal."

"No kidding," she snorted. "Anyhow, on my very first mission, the very first time I stepped out, it hit me. I knew right away why nobody above Earth5 is permitted outside. Unbelievable! There's something with us Upper Earthers and the pheromites of Rooted Earthenkind. Best of all, the link is completely, totally, wonderfully mutual. So I think you can understand why I grab any mercy mission to Earth I can."

He winced, hesitated, then said, "Have you ever considered getting professional help? I mean, Rooted Earthenkind, after all..."



"Next time, I'll shake the Psycho Wardens for good and get a real taste of those gwaggermen." She shivered. "I'm going to stay."

He shot upright. "Ha! Now I know you're lying, Bonnie. Purebred Earthenkind do not have gwags."

She grinned. "Not in the literal sense perhaps, Johnny, but with the right woman, the right pheromone mix—every man has a gwag."

Excited: "Really?" Then back to reality: "But didn't the Wardens put you on the restricted list?"

"Of course. But who bothers to check? I've been on report so many times, it'd make the right hemisphere of your brain toss up *folia* like so many cookies on a ruptured docking."

"The Earthenkind'll kill you, you know? Anybody who stays behind gets killed."

"It's not true."

"It is, too."

"Hose out your brain, Land. The trouble with you Earth4 types is you never think on your own. You gobble up anything anybody feeds you. They *assent* us to believe we'll be killed if we stay behind. It's to keep all the susceptible Upper Earthers like me cooped up on board. If there were more like you around—the more recent generations—they probably wouldn't send any of my kind on the Earth missions. But they have no choice. They need crews, at least until they decide to give up on Earth."

He remained skeptical. "You're one of those Olistoners, aren't you? I'll bet you see a conspiracy in almost everything. I'll bet you even believe there was more than one pomegranate tosser in the assassination of BenevolA Earth55 Neblos, don't you?" Six decades after the killing of the beloved political appointee, suspicion and controversy prevailed.

"Believe what you want, Johnny, but I'm telling you the truth. The treasurers are afraid that if word gets out about the strength of the pheromone mix, they'll be overrun with so many mercy missions to Earth, they'll be forced to save the planet. I'm telling you, it's a perfect mix. The last thing the authorities want is people like me to fall in love with the place. Earth is on the doomsday list, and that's where they want it to stay."

"They should spray for pheromones. That's what they should do."

Her patience with him was turning to patronage. "I believe they have tried, Johnny. But it seems the worse the atmosphere and environment become on Earth, the faster the pheromones reproduce. Spraying does nothing. I'm telling you, you can't imagine the power of the pheromones! The feeling..."

"I think I can," he said. "I think I can."

"Oh, yes! Of course. I'd almost forgotten," she said. "You're an Earthenkind male from Pyoshua. Certainly you know the feeling."

Bonnie's beeper cut their breakfast short. She washed the cream and syrup from the latex belly patch of her sex jumper, shoveled her remaining sausages onto Land's plate, gave him a sisterly kiss on the cheek, and departed.

"You need help," he shouted after her.

The room was too empty without her. Well, not her specifically, he thought, but rather the presence of another body,



another woman. He left a short while later, a new publi-button flashing above his navel: NOTEBOOKS ON EINSTEIN'S BAGELS...INN & OUT, WITH OR WITHOUT. In fact, he got slapped with another three before his beeper summoned.

Several among the crew cheered

as the *Goodgref* passed through Bagel 11. Land barely noticed. He sat with the ship's rejil, practising chords, raking scales, waiting for *TirenE* to come by. And when she finally arrived, he let loose as he never had before. As witnesses would later say, "That young Earthenkind lassified played his armpits off." In fact, he played until his thumbs were split and bloody and his forehead ploughed and bruised. He played till his lungs were breathing fire and his tongue a charred-up cinder. He played till every publi-button had clattered to the floor and their flashing ceased. And, when he was done, the room damp and misty with appreciation, the accolades extended by almost every shipmate in attendance, Pyoshuans included, Land approached *TirenE* as cocky as if he were a Pyoshuan himself. "Gare do doin me vor a owl of ambu?" he asked.

She blinked. "Pardon me?"

"Am orry—er—sorry," he said carefully, doing his best to enunciate in spite of the agony. "My tongue is swollen and it's hard to talk."

"Yes, I can imagine. That was quite an energetic performance. I certainly hope, however, that—"

"Would you care to join me for a bowl of tambu?"

She let the invitation pass without acknowledgment and spoke to him in a tone that defied interruption. "As I was about to say, I certainly hope your affinity for the rejil is neither inspired by me nor perpetuated for me."

He interrupted her, anyway. "Of course not!" he lied.

"I am pleased to hear that. Many gullible Earthenkind males believe that rejil music has a profound aphrodisiacal effect on Pyoshuans of my gender. This is, of course, nothing more than absolute nonsense, a childish myth created, no doubt, by an unscrupulous rejil manufacturer from a world I can only hope was cut off long ago. With that, Johnny Land, I bid you a pleasant rest of the evening and a very good night."

He wasn't sure which was greater: his disappointment in failing to win her once more or his relief in realizing he would never again need to play the rejil. "Yood ight, Irene," he said.

The Goodgref hummed into the port

of Old Chicago in the Hot Box Region, an arid stretch of windowless towers, asphalt ribbons, and vast low-rises of parched gray that skirted a lifeless crater the locals called Lake Michigan.

Land was given clearance and descended, the thermostat of his coolsuit set to max. A skittish jitney with underinflated tires coughed him across the tarmac to a clapboard trailer. Three Rooted Earthenkind officials, a man and two women, greeted him with neither fanfare nor pretension. They were grateful and they showed it, and his anxiety dissipated at once. The taller and less emaciated of the women slapped his bill of lading. He entered the committal code and, without further delay, the idling transports backed against the shipping chutes and

the unloading of the Goodgrief began.

Outside the barriers, crowds gathered, bodies competing for the ideal vantage. The man explained: "For most of them, this is the only show in town."

Land surveyed the ports of the ship, but the tinting made it impossible to tell who was or wasn't watching.

The officials invited Land to join them on the deck for iced tambo, and he accepted. He hoped the pungency of their body odor might diminish in the open air. It didn't. What's more, the iced tambo lacked ice. But he remained, curiosity dictating his every action.

They sat, feet up on the railing, exchanging forgettable chitchat as the cargo rolled off.

"Interested in a tour outside the gates?" the man asked.

"Yes," Land said. "I'd like that."

"I'll clear it with your Psycho Wardens."

"Something to look forward to, then," Land said.

"Hardly," one of the women muttered.

He stayed alert and hopeful, but the pheromites showed no sign of anything remarkable. *Bonne Bonney. Who cared what her name was? She was a liar; he was sure of it.*

"There was talk they might cut us off. Have you heard anything, Johnny Land?"

"No. Nothing."

"Do you think they might rebuild the atmosphere?"

"They might."

"They wouldn't cut us off. Earth is where it all began, you know."

"I know," he said.

"You overestimate them, Brya. They'd cut us off tomorrow if it served their ends."

"You don't think that's true, do you, Johnny Land?"

"I don't think it's true," he said.

No. Nobody's pheromites were dancing here. He excused himself, far more diplomatically than he had imagined himself capable, and returned to the ship as Phase One of the unloading picked up the pace. It would be a five-phase process, each phase twenty-four hours.

"Did they smell as bad as I've heard?" clEc asked.

Land answered, "Yes."

"Did you touch them?" asked another.

"Yes. During the greeting."

"I hope you washed your hands."

"I've had the same shots as you; there's nothing to fear."

"They better appreciate our coming. I've heard of crews that never get so much as a thank-you. These Rooted types are not like us."

"They seem very appreciative."

"What did they talk about?"

He told them.

"What did you answer?"

He told them.

"How could you drink their tambo? What did they serve it in?"

The debriefing went on far too long. He reached his cabin door exhausted. As he positioned his eyes to unlock the entry plate, TirenE startled him with a soft "One moment, please." She had been the only one without a question.

He stared at her. He could not speak.

She smiled, took his hand in hers and raised it to her mouth, her eyes never leaving his. And, ever so lightly, she bit him on the flesh beneath his thumb.

He swallowed. She withdrew.

"Come inside, please," he said.

She shook her head, and was gone.

At breakfast, she caught him by the tray stack. "I don't know what you did to me, but I'm warning you not to try it again. I am an Earth71, you are a 4. We do not mix. That's all there is to it."

"But I—" he began to say, but there was no one to say it to.

She was waiting for him again on his return from Phase Two of the unloading. This time, she kissed him wet and fall on the mouth. At breakfast she said, "If I had my way, I'd shove a nejil down your sick, polluted throat."

She was there for him again on his return from Phase Three of the unloading. She was in his bed, fully clothed but clearly willing. He did not intend to let the opportunity pass. But she was off before his socks.

At breakfast she said, "I don't understand. I can't resist you in the evening, yet can hardly stomach you by morn. We've got to talk."

"Yes, let's," he said.

It was during his tour beyond the gates that Land asked, "What happens to those of us who stay behind?"

The driver adjusted his mirror for a better view of this Earth4. The Rooted Earthenkind official turned slowly, warily. "Why? Do you think you might like to settle here?"

The driver coughed, eyes on the mirror and Land.

"No," Land said quickly. Brown and gray, gray and brown—the places and the people. *Earth in a nutshell*. Bleak within the gates, bleaker without. "I was just curious. That's all." He glanced up, and the driver turned away.

"Not many have made such a choice, you know."

"I know."

"But probably more than you might think."

"Really?"

"Tell me, Johnny Land, what do you think happens to them?"

"I don't know. Honest. I don't."

The official nodded, puckered his lips, and nodded some more. At last he said: "What happens to those who stay behind is what happens to all of us."

The driver downshifted the rickety off-roader. It rumbled into the crater of Lake Michigan, and nothing more was said.

She was there for him again on his return from Phase Four of the unloading. She was in his bed, under the covers, her clothes scattered across the floor.

It was the moment he had dreamed of. "Don't leave," he pleaded, fumbling with the zipper of his coolsuit.

"I don't think I have the strength to go," she said. "I want you as much as you want me."

"The damn zipper—"

"You know why this is happening, don't you?" she said.



"I have a few theories," he said, rummaging for a knife or scissors or anything to rip the zipper free.

"It's the Rooted Earthkind, isn't it? You go among them and come back with their pheromites. That's it, isn't it?"

He slammed the drawer and dashed to the medicine cabinet. "Could be. I don't know. You could be right." *Where was his tool pouch?*

"I am right. I know I'm right. That's why you mean nothing to me by morning. I look at you and I'm as repulsed as always—as I should be. But then you return at night, and I can't help myself."

"The damn zipper. The damn damn damn damn zipper."

"Come to me," she said suddenly. "I'll take care of it." And she tore the coolsuit from him as rapidly as a wild cryojet might attack a biscuit of pink wafers.

He did not see her at breakfast.

Nor was she there for him on his return from Phase Five of the unloading.

He knew where she had gone. The Psycho Wardens knew, too. But it was too late for anyone to do anything about it. Phase Five was complete. Launch protocol had begun the moment Land stepped aboard. When it came to time, mercy had its limits.

"I've heard they always kill them," cLEc said. "I'll wager they've killed her by now."

"Yeah," Land nodded, resisting the inclination to accept cLEc's bet. *And if it really were the case? If she were dead? What a way to go!* he thought aloud.

cLEc scratched his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," Land said. "Nothing at all."

How would be ever get her back? How would be ever get her out of his mind?

The investigation was closed as soon as it was begun. The Psycho Wardens had been outsmarted by an Earth71. There was no shame in that. The recommendation: Henceforth, no Upper Earthers, more than 25 generations removed from Earth habitation, should be permitted on mercy missions to said Third World. (Soon after, the recommendation plummeted to seven generations removed. Rumor had it that a relatively simpleminded Earth8 managed to elude the Wardens as successfully as the far more sophisticated TirenE Earth71 Pyos.)

It took Land almost an entire year to latch on to another mercy mission. There were far fewer missions to be had. Unfortunately, his perseverance was for naught. During layover for encryption, word came down that Earth had been cut off. Land was not forced to remain on the Bagels, but he did not know where else he might go. Certainly not back to Pyosha. Another unilateral relationship would be more than he could bear.

At first, he taught rejil-playing to Earth4s and less, but

came to discover that watching eager music students cripple themselves was not his cup of tankhu.

Later, Johnny found employment with a publi-button agency. In fact, they considered him a prodigy of sorts. One of his earliest slogans went on to win a Bronze in the Deli Platner's annual advertising competition: EINSTEIN'S BAGELS... YOU'LL BE PHEROMITEY GLAD YOU CAME!

In time, the E.B. Dairy Bar even put his photograph in a place of honor on the wall. Nobody ate ice cream like Johnny Bismol Barker Earth4 Land. At least, that's what the Quivoscets said. ▲



about the author

Michael Libley has been making a living with words—written and spoken—for more than 20 years. He does promotional writing in addition to fiction, and he is the composer of 35,000 trivia questions for an arcade game that can be found in better bars across the continent. For almost 14 years, he was the writer and on-air host of a trivia show on Montreal's number one English radio station, CJAD. He gave up the program in 1994 to recapture his weekends and devote more time to his fiction writing.

He has since made short story sales in England and the United States. "Pheromitey Glad" is his first appearance in AMAZING Stories.

about the illustrator

Following graduation at the College of Art and Design in Detroit, Marc Gabbana began his freelance illustration career in 1989. He has done major advertising and editorial work for agencies, publishers and CD-rom game developers all over the United States.



Marc is now involved in creating conceptual artwork for the motion picture industry. Spawn was his first effort and he is currently working on a major film production for Lucasfilm.

Amazing facts

IN THE EARLY 1950s, it was not unusual for Amazing Stories cover art to feature a scantily clad damsel in distress. Here an angelic-looking intruder disrupts a quiet picnic, in a scene from "The Mad Monster of Mogo" by Don Wilcox. Despite the fact that the contents page of the November 1952 issue credits Leo Ramon Summers for the art, the illustrator was Walter Popp—as attested to by the signature in the bottom corner.

NOVEMBER
25¢

AND GOAL TO GO By ALERED COPPEL

AMAZING STORIES



Every lovely woman was a fragile toy
to this MAD MONSTER OF MOGO
By DON WILCOX

Walter Ross

Alvin had no idea what was going to happen when he left the house that morning. But you'd think by now he'd realize that, for a Maker, there's no such thing as an uneventful day. Excerpted from the author's upcoming novel, *Heartfire*.

Gooses

BY
ORSON
SCOTT
CARD



ARTHUR STUART STOOD AT THE WINDOW of the taxidermy shop, rapt. Alvin Smith was halfway down the block before he realized that Arthur was no longer with him. By the time he got back, a tall White man was questioning the boy.

"Where's your master, then?"

Arthur did not look at him, his gaze riveted on a stuffed bird, posed as if it were about to land on a branch.

"Boy, answer me, or I'll have the constable..."

"He's with me," said Alvin.

The man at once became friendly. "Glad to know it, friend. A boy this age, you'd think if he was free his parents would've

taught him proper respect when a White man—"

"I think he only cares about the birds in the window," Alvin laid a gentle hand on Arthur's shoulder. "What is it, Arthur Stuart?"

Only the sound of Alvin's voice could draw Arthur out of his reverie. "How did he see?"

"Who?" asked the man.

"See what?" asked Alvin.

"The way the bird pushes down with his wings just before roosting, and then poses like a statue. Nobody sees that."

"What's the boy talking about?" asked the man.

"He's a great observer of birds," said Alvin. "I think he's admiring the taxidermy work in the window."

The man beamed with pride. "I'm the taxidermist here. Almost all of those are mine."

Arthur finally responded to the taxidermist. "Most of these are just dead birds. They looked more alive when they lay bloody in the field where the shotgun brought them down. But this one. And that one...." He pointed to a hawk, stooping. "Those were done by someone who knew the living bird."

The taxidermist glowered for a moment, then put on a tradesman's smile. "Do you like those? The work of a French fellow goes by the name John-James." He said the double name as if it were a joke. "Journeyman work, is all. Those delicate poses—I doubt the wires will hold up over time."

Alvin smiled at the man. "I'm a journeyman myself, but I do work that lasts."

"No offense meant," the taxidermist said at once. But he also seemed to have lost interest, for if Alvin was merely a journeyman in some trade, he wouldn't have enough money to buy anything; nor would an itinerant workman have much use for stuffed animals.

"So you sell this Frenchman's work for less?" asked Alvin. The taxidermist hesitated. "More, actually."

"The price falls when it's done by the master," asked Alvin innocently.

The taxidermist glared at him. "I sell his work

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
TONY DITERLIZZI

on consignment, and he sets the price. I doubt anyone will buy it. But the fellow fancies himself an artist. He only stuffs and mounts the birds so he can paint pictures of them, and when he's done painting, he sells the bird itself."

"He'd be better to talk to the bird instead of killing it," said Arthur Stuart. "They'd hold still for him to paint, a man who sees birds so true."

The taxidermist looked at Arthur Stuart oddly. "You let this boy talk a bit forward, don't you?"

"In Philadelphia I thought all folks could talk plain," said Alvin, smiling.

The taxidermist finally understood just how deeply Alvin was mocking him. "I'm not a Quaker, my man, and neither are you." With that he turned his back on Alvin and Arthur and returned to his store. Through the window Alvin could see him sulking, casting sidelong glances at them now and then.

"Come on, Arthur Stuart, let's go meet Verily and Mike for dinner."

Arthur took one step, but still couldn't tear his gaze from the roosting bird.

"Arthur, before the fellow comes out and orders us to move along."

Even with that, Alvin finally had to take Arthur by the hand and near drag him away. And as they walked, Arthur had an inward look to him. "What are you brooding about?" asked Alvin.

"I want to talk to that Frenchman. I have a question to ask him."

Alvin knew better than to ask Arthur Stuart what the question was. It would spare him hearing Arthur's inevitable reply: "Why should I ask you? You don't know."



Verily Cooper and Mike Fink were already eating when Alvin and Arthur got to the rooming house. The proprietor was a Quaker woman of astonishing girth and very limited talents as a cook—but she made up for the blandness of her food with the quantities she served, and more important was the fact that, being a Quaker in more than name, Mistress Louder made no distinction between half-Black Arthur Stuart and the three White men traveling with him. Arthur Stuart sat at the same table as the others, and even though one roomer moved out the day Arthur Stuart first sat at table, she never acted as if she even noticed the fellow was gone. Which was why Alvin tried to make up for it by taking Arthur Stuart with him on daily forays out into the woods and meadows along the river to gather wild ginger, wintergreen, spearmint, and thyme to spice up her cooking. She took the herbs, with their implied criticism of her kitchen, in good humor, and tonight the potatoes had been boiled with the wintergreen they brought her yesterday.

"Edible?" she asked Alvin as he took his first bite.

Verily was the one who answered, while Alvin savored the mouthful with a beauteous expression on his face. "Madame, your generosity guarantees you will go to heaven, but it's the flavor of tonight's potatoes that assures you will be asked to cook there."

She laughed and made as if to hit him with a spoon. "Verily

Cooper, thou smooth-tongued lawyer, knowest thou not that Quakers have no truck with flattery?" But they all knew that while she didn't believe the flattery, she did believe the warm-heartedness behind it.

While the other roomers were still at table, Mike Fink regaled them all with the tale of his visit to the Simple House, where Andrew Jackson was scandalizing the elite of Philadelphia by bringing his cronies from Tennessee and Kentucky, letting them chew and spit in rooms that once offered homesick European ambassadors a touch of the elegance of the old country. Fink repeated a tale that Jackson himself told that very day, about a fine Philadelphia lady who criticized the behavior of his companions. "This is the Simple House," Jackson declared, "and these are simple people." When the lady tried to refute the point, Jackson told her, "This is my house for the next four years, and these are my friends."

"But they have no manners," said the lady.

"They have excellent manners," said Jackson. "Western manners. But they're tolerant folks. They'll overlook the fact that you ain't took a bite of food yet, nor drunk any good corn liquor, nor spat once even though you always look like you got a mouth full of *sometwib*!" Mike Fink laughed long and hard at this, and so did the roomers, though some were laughing at the lady and some were laughing at Jackson.

Arthur Stuart asked a question that was bothering Alvin. "How does Andy Jackson get anything done, if the Simple House is full of river rats and bumpkins all day?"

"He needs something done, why, one of us river rats went and done it for him," said Mike.

"But most river men can't read or write," Arthur said.

"Well, Old Hickory can do all the readin' and writin' for hisself," said Mike. "He sends the river rats to deliver messages and persuade people."

"Persuade people?" asked Alvin. "I hope they don't use the methods of persuasion you once tried on me."

Mike whooped at that. "Iffen Old Hickory let the boys do those old tricks, I don't think there'd be six noses left in Congress, nor twenty ears!"

Finally, though, the tales of the frolicking at the Simple House—or degradation, depending on your point of view—wound down and the other roomers left. Only Alvin and Arthur, as latecomers, were still eating as they made their serious reports on the day's work.

Mike shook his head sadly when Alvin asked him if he had a chance to talk to Andy Jackson. "Oh, he included me in the room, if that's what you mean. But talking alone, no, not likely. See, Andy Jackson may be a lawyer but he knows river rats, and my name rang a bell with him. Haven't lived down my old reputation yet, Alvin. Sorry."

Alvin smiled and waved off the apology. "There'll come a day when the president will meet with us."

"It was premature, anyway," said Verily. "Why try for a land grant when we don't even know what we're going to use it for?"

"Do so," said Alvin, playing at a children's quarrel.

"Do not," said Verily, grinning.

"We got a city to build."

"No sir," said Verily. "We have the *name* of a city, but we don't

have the *plan* of a city, or even the idea of the city—"

"It's a city of Makers!"

"Well, it would have been nice if the Red Prophet had told you what that means," said Verily.

"He showed it to me inside the waterspout," said Alvin. "He doesn't know what it means any more than I do. But we both saw it, a city made of glass, filled with people, and the city itself taught them everything."

"Amid all that seeing," said Verily, "did you perhaps hear a hint of what we're supposed to tell people to persuade them to come and help us build it?"

"I take it that means you didn't accomplish what you set out to do, either," said Alvin.

"Oh, I perused the Congressional Library," said Verily. "Found many references to the Crystal City, but most of them were tied up with Spanish explorers who thought it had something to do with the fountain of youth or the Seven Cities of the Onion."

"Onion?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"One of the sources misheard the Indian name 'Cibola' as a Spanish word for 'onion,' and I thought it was funny," said Verily. "All dead ends. But there is an interesting datum that I can't readily construe."

"Wouldn't want to have anything constrodded really," said Alvin.

"Don't play frontiersman with me," said Verily. "Your wife was a better schoolteacher than to leave you that ignorant."

"You two leave off teasing," demanded Arthur Stuart. "What did you find out?"

"There's a post office in a place that calls itself Crystal City in the state of Tennessee."

"There's probably a place called Fountain of Youth, too," said Alvin.

"Well, I thought it was interesting," said Verily.

"Know anything else about it?"

"Postmaster's a Mr. Crawford, who also has the titles Mayor and—I think you'll like this, Alvin—White Prophet."

Mike Fink laughed, but Alvin didn't like it. "White Prophet. As if to set himself against Tenskowa-Tawa!"

"I just told you all I know," said Verily. "Now, what did you accomplish?"

"I've been in Philadelphia for two weeks and I haven't accomplished a thing," said Alvin. "I thought the city of Benjamin Franklin would have something to teach me. But Franklin's dead, and there's no special music in the street, no wisdom lingering around his grave. Here's where America was born, boys, but I don't think it lives here anymore. America lives out there where I grew up—what we got in Philadelphia now is just the *government* of America. Like finding fresh dung on the road. It ain't a horse, but it tells you a horse is somewhere nearby."

"It took you two weeks in Philadelphia to find that out?" said Mike Fink.

Verily joined in. "My father always said that government is like watching another man piss in your boot. Someone feels better but it certainly isn't you."

They weren't done talking for a long while, but in the end, the

decision was to leave Philadelphia in the morning, soon as they could, so they could get in a good day's journey before dark.

Alvin woke early in the morning, before dawn, but it took him no more than two breaths to notice that Arthur Stuart was gone. The window stood open, and though they were on the top floor of the house, Alvin knew that wouldn't stop Arthur Stuart, who seemed to think that gravity owed him a favor.

Alvin woke Verily and Mike, who were stirring anyway, and asked them to get the horses saddled and loaded up while he went in search of the boy.

Mike only laughed, though. "Probably found him some girl he wants to kiss good-bye."

Alvin looked at him in shock. "What are you talking about?"

Mike looked back at him, just as surprised. "Are you blind? Are you deaf? Arthur's voice is changing. He's one whisker from being a man."

"Speaking of whiskers," said Verily, "I think the shadow on his upper lip is due to become a brush pretty soon. In fact, I daresay his face grows more hair on it already than yours does, Alvin."

"I don't see your face flowing with moustachery, either," said Alvin.

"I shave," said Verily.

"But it's a long time between Christmases," said Alvin. "I'll see you before breakfast is done, I wager."

As Alvin went downstairs, he stopped into the kitchen, where Mistress Louder was rolling out the dough for morning biscuits. "You didn't happen to see Arthur Stuart this morning?" asked Alvin.

"And when wast thou planning to tell me ye were leaving?"

"When we settled up after breakfast," said Alvin. "We wasn't trying to slip out, it was no secret we were packing up."

Only then did he notice the tears running down her cheeks. "I hardly slept last night."

Alvin put his hands on her shoulders. "Mistress Louder, I never thought you'd take on so. It's a rooming house, ain't it? And roomers come and go."

She sighed loudly. "Just like children," she said.

"And don't children come back to the nest from time to time?"

"If that's a promise, I won't have to turn these into salt biscuits with my silly tears," she said.

"I can promise that I'll never pass a night in Philadelphia anywhere other than your house, lessen my wife and I settle down here someday, and then we'll send our children to your house for breakfast while we sleep lazy."

She laughed outright. "The Lord took twice the time making thee, Alvin Smith, cause it took that long to put the mischief in."

"Mischief sneaks in by itself," said Alvin. "That's its nature."

Only then did Mistress Louder remember Alvin's original question. "As for Arthur Stuart, I caught him climbing down the tree outside when I went out to bring in firewood."

"And you didn't wake me? Or stop him?"

She ignored the implied accusation. "I forced some cold johnny-cake into his hands before he was out the door again. Said he had an errand to run before ye boys left this morning."

"Well, at least that sounds like he means to come back," said Alvin.

"It does," said Mistress Louder. "Though if he didn't, thou'rt not his master, I think."

"Just because he's not my property don't mean I'm not responsible for him," said Alvin.

"I wasn't speaking of the law," said Mistress Louder. "I was speaking the simple truth. He doesn't obey thee like a boy, but like a man, because he wants to please thee. He'll do not because thou commandest, but does it only when he agrees he ought to."

"But that's true of all men and all masters, even slaves," said Alvin.

"What I'm saying is he doesn't act in fear of thee," said Mistress Louder. "And so it won't do for thee to be hot with him when thou find him. Thou hast no right."

Only then did Alvin realize that he was a bit angry with Arthur Stuart for running off. "He's still young," said Alvin.

"And thou'rt what, a grey-beard with a stoop in his back?" She laughed. "Get on and find him. Arthur Stuart never seems to know the danger a lad of his tribe faces, noon and night."

"Nor the danger that sneaks up behind," said Alvin. He kissed her cheek. "Don't let all those biscuits disappear before I get back."

"It's thy business, not mine, what time thou'lt choose to come back," she said. "Who can say how hungry the others will be this morning?"

For that remark, Alvin dipped his finger into the flour and striped her nose with it, then headed for the door. She stuck her tongue out at him but didn't wipe the flour away. "I'll be a clown if thou want me to," she called after him.

It was far too early in the morning for the shop to be open, but Alvin went straight for the taxidermist's anyway. What other business could Arthur Stuart have? Mike's guess that Arthur had found a girl was not likely to be right—the boy almost never left Alvin's side, so there'd been no chance for such a thing, even if Arthur was old enough to want to try.

The streets were crowded with farmers from the surrounding countryside, bringing their goods to market, but the shops in buildings along the streets were still closed. Paperboys and postmen made their rounds, and dairymaids clattered up the alleys, stopping to leave milk in the kitchens along the way. It was noisy on the streets, but it was the fresh noise of morning. No one was shouting yet. No neighbors quarreling, no hucksters selling, no driver shouting out a warning to clear the way.

No Arthur at the front door of the taxidermy shop.

But where else would he have gone? He had a question, and

he wouldn't rest until he had the answer. Only it wasn't the taxidermist who had the answer, was it? It was the French painter of birds, John-James. And somewhere inside the shop, there was bound to be a note of the man's address. Would Arthur really be so foolishly as to...

There was indeed an open window, with two crates on a barrel stacked beneath it. Arthur Stuart, it's no better to be taken for a burglar than to be taken for a slave.

Alvin went to the back door. He twisted the knob. It turned a little, but not enough to draw back the latch. Locked, then.

Alvin leaned against the door and closed his eyes, searching

with his doodlebug till he found the heartfire inside the shop. There he was, Arthur Stuart, bright with life, hot with adventure. Like so many times before, Alvin wished he had some part of Margaret's gift, to see into the heartfire and learn something of the future and past, or even just the thoughts of the present moment—that would be convenient.

He dared not call out for Arthur—his voice would only raise an alarm and almost guarantee that Arthur would be caught inside the shop. For all Alvin knew, the taxidermist lived upstairs or in an upper floor of one of the nearby buildings.

So now he put his doodlebug inside the lock, to feel out how the thing was made. An old lock, not very smooth. Alvin evened out the rough parts, peeling away corrosion and dirt. To change the shape of it was easier than moving

it, so where two metal surfaces pressed flat against each other, keeping the latch from opening, Alvin changed them both to a bevel, making the metal flow into the new shapes, until the two surfaces slid easily across each other. With that he could turn the knob, and silently the latch slid free.

Still he did not open the door, for now he had to turn his attention to the hinges. They were rougher and dirtier than the lock. Did the man even use this door? Alvin smoothed and cleaned them also, and now, when he turned the knob and pushed open the door, the only sound was the whisper of the breeze passing into the shop.

Arthur Stuart sat at the taxidermist's worktable, holding a bluejay between his hands, stroking the feathers. He looked up at Alvin and said softly, "It isn't even dead."

Alvin touched the bird. Yes, there was some warmth, and a heartbeat. The shot that stunned it was still lodged in its skull. The brain was bruised and the bird would soon die of it, even though none of the other birdshot that had hit it would be fatal.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" asked Alvin. "The address of the painter?"

"No," said Arthur bleakly.

Alvin went to work on the bird, quickly as he could. It was more delicate than metal work, moving his doodlebug through



Mistress Louder

the pathways of a living creature, making tiny alterations here and there. It helped him to hold the animal, to touch it while he worked on it. The blood in the brain was soon draining into the veins, and the damaged arteries were closed. The flesh healed rapidly under the tiny balls of lead, forcing them back out of the body. Even the ball lodged in the skull shrank, loosened, dropped out.

The jay rustled its feathers, struggled in Alvin's grasp. He let it loose.

"They'll just kill it anyway," said Alvin.

"So we'll let it out," said Arthur.

Alvin sighed. "Then we'd be thieves, wouldn't we?"

"The window's open," said Arthur. "The bluejay can leave after the man comes in this morning. So he'll think it escaped on its own."

"And how will we get the bird to do that?"

Arthur looked at him like he was an idiot, then leaned close to the bluejay, which stood still on the worktable. Arthur whispered so softly that Alvin couldn't hear the words. Then he whistled, several sharp birdlike sounds.

The jay leapt into the air and flapped noisily around the room. Alvin ducked to avoid it.

"He's not going to hit you," said Arthur, amused.

"Let's go," said Alvin.

He took Arthur through the back door. When he drew it closed, he stayed for just a moment longer, his fingers lingering on the knob, as he returned the pieces of the lock to their proper shape.

"What are you doing here?" The taxidermist stood at the turn of the alley.

"Hoping to find you in, sir," said Alvin calmly, not taking his hand off the knob.

"With your hand on the knob?" said the taxidermist, his voice icy with suspicion.

"You didn't answer to our knock," said Alvin. "I thought you might be so hard at work you didn't hear. All we want is to know where we might find the journeyman painter. The Frenchman John-James."

"I know what you wanted," said the taxidermist. "Stand away from the door before I call the constable."

Alvin and Arthur stepped back.

"That's not good enough," said the taxidermist. "Skulking at back doors—how do I know you don't plan to knock me over the head and steal from me as soon as I have the door unlocked?"

"If that was our plan, sir," said Alvin, "you'd already be lying on the ground and I'd have the key in my hand, wouldn't I?"

"So you *did* have it all thought out!"

"Seems to me *you're* the one who has plans for robbing," said Alvin. "And then you accuse others of wanting to do what only you had thought of."

Angrily the man pulled out his key and slid it into the lock. He braced himself to twist hard, expecting the corroded metal

to resist. So he visibly staggered when the key turned easily and the door slipped open silently.

He might have stopped to examine the lock and the hinges, but at that moment the bluejay that had spent the night slowly dying on his worktable fluttered angrily in his face and flew out the door. "Not!" the man shouted. "That's Mr. Ridley's trophy!"

Arthur Stuart laughed. "Not much of a trophy," he said. "Not if it won't hold still."

The taxidermist stood in the doorway, looking for the bird. It was long gone. He then looked back and forth from Alvin to Arthur. "I know you had something to do with this," he said. "I don't know what or how, but you witched up that bird."

"No such thing," said Alvin. "When I arrived here I had no idea you kept living birds inside. I thought you only dealt with dead ones."

"I do! That bird was dead!"

"John-James," said Alvin. "We want to see him before we leave town."

"Why should I help you?" said the taxidermist.

"Because we asked," said Alvin, "and it would cost you nothing."

"Cost me nothing? How am I going to explain to Mr. Ridley?"

"Tell him to make sure his birds are dead before he brings them to you," said Arthur Stuart.

"I won't have such talk from a Black boy," said the taxidermist. "If you can't control your boy, then you shouldn't bring him out among gentlemen!"

"Have I?" asked Alvin.

"Have you what?"

"Brought him out among gentlemen," said Alvin. "I'm waiting to see the courtesy that would mark you as such a one."

The taxidermist glowered at him. "John-James Audubon is staying in a room at the Liberty Inn. But you won't find him there at this time of day—he'll be out looking at birds till mid-morning."

"Then good day to you," said Alvin. "You might oil your locks and hinges from time to time. They'll stay in better condition if you do."

The taxidermist got a quizzical look on his face. He was still opening and closing his silent, smooth-hinged door as they walked back down the alley to the street.

"Well, that's that," said Alvin. "We'll never find your John-James Audubon before we have to leave."

Arthur Stuart looked at him in consternation. "And why won't we?" He whistled a couple of times and the bluejay fluttered down to alight on his shoulder. Arthur whispered and whistled for a few moments, and the bird hopped up onto Arthur's head, then (to Alvin's surprise) Alvin's shoulder, then Alvin's head, and only then launched itself into the air and flew off up the street.

"He's bound to be near the river this morning," said Arthur Stuart. "Geese are feeding there, on their way south."

Alvin looked around. "It's still summer. It's hot."

"Not up north," said Arthur Stuart. "I heard two flocks yesterday."

"I haven't heard a thing."

Arthur Stuart grinned at him.

"I thought you stopped hearing birds," said Alvin. "When I changed you, in the river. I thought you lost all that."

Arthur Stuart shrugged. "I did. But I remembered how it felt. I kept listening."

"It's coming back?" asked Alvin.

Arthur shook his head. "I have to figure it out. It doesn't just come to me, the way it used to. It's not a knack anymore. It's..."

Alvin supplied the word. "A skill."

"I was trying to decide between a wish and a memory."

"You heard geese calling, and I didn't. My ears are pretty good, Arthur."

Arthur grinned at him again. "There's hearing and there's listening."

There were several men with shotguns stalking the geese. It was easy enough to guess which was John-James Audubon, however. Even if they hadn't spotted the sketchpad inside the open hunter's sack, and even if he hadn't been oddly dressed in a Frenchman's exaggerated version of an American frontiersman's outfit—tailored deerskin—they would have known which hunter he was, by one simple test: He was the only one who had actually found the geese.

He was aiming at a goose floating along the river. Without thinking, Alvin called out, "Have you no shame, Mr. Audubon?"

Audubon, startled, half turned to look at Alvin and Arthur. Whether it was the sudden movement or Alvin's voice, the lead goose honked and rose dripping from the water, staggering at first from the effort, then rising smoothly with great beats of his wings, water trailing behind him in a silvery cascade. In a moment, all the other geese also rose and flew down the river. Audubon raised his shotgun, but then cursed and rounded on Alvin, the gun still leveled. "Pour quoi, imbécile!"

"You planning to shoot me?" asked Alvin.

Reluctantly, Audubon lowered the gun and remembered his English, which at the moment wasn't very good. "I have the beautiful creature in my eye, but you, man of the mouth open!"

"Sorry, but I couldn't believe you'd shoot a goose on the water like that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's—not sporting."

"Of course it's not sporting!" His English was getting better as he warmed to the argument. "I'm not here for sport! Look everywhere, Monsieur, and tell me the very important thing you do *not* see."

"You got no dog," said Arthur Stuart.

"Yes! Le garçon noir comprend! I cannot shoot the bird in the air because how do I collect the bird? It falls, the wing breaks, what good is it to me now? I shoot on the water, then splash splash, I have the goose."

"Very practical," said Alvin. "If you were starving, and needed the goose for food."

"Food!" cried Audubon. "Do I look like a hungry man?"

"A little lean, maybe," said Alvin. "But you could probably fast for a day or two without eating over."

"I do not understand you, Monsieur Américain. Et je ne veux pas te comprendre. Go away!" Audubon started downstream along the riverbank, the direction the geese had gone.

"Mister Audubon," Arthur Stuart called out.

"I must shoot you before you go away!" he called out, exasperated.

"I can bring them back," said Arthur.

Audubon turned and looked at him. "You call geese?" He pulled a wooden goose call from his pocket of his jacket. "I call geese, too. But when they hear this, they think, *Sacre Dieu!* That goose is dying! Fly away! Fly away!"

Arthur Stuart kept walking toward him, and instead of answering, he began to make odd sounds with his throat and through his nose. Not goose calls, really, or not that anyone would notice. Not even an imitation of a goose. And yet there was something goose-like about the babble that came from his mouth. And it wasn't all that loud, either. But moments later, the geese came back, skimming over the surface of the water.

Audubon brought the shotgun to his shoulder. At once Arthur changed his call, and the geese flew away from the shore and settled far out on the water.

In an agony of frustration, Audubon whirled on Arthur and Alvin. "When did I insult you or the cauliflower face of your ugly mother? Which clumsy stinking Philadelphia prostitute was your sister? Or was it le bon Dieu that I offended? Note *Pire Celeste*, why must I do this penance?"

"I'm not going to bring the geese back if you're just going to shoot them," said Arthur.

"What good are they if I don't shoot one?"

"You're not going to eat it, you're just going to paint it," said Arthur Stuart. "So it doesn't have to be dead."

"How can I paint a bird that will not stand in one place?" cried Audubon. Then he realized something. "You know my name. You know I paint. But I do not know you."

"I'm Alvin Smith, and this is my ward, Arthur Stuart."

"Wart? What kind of slave is that?"

"Ward. He's not a slave. But he's under my protection."

"But who will protect *me* from the two of you? Why could you not be ordinary robbers, taking my money and run away?"

"Arthur has a question for you," said Alvin.

"Here is my answer: *Level Départé!*"

"What if I can get a goose to hold still for you without killing it?" asked Arthur Stuart.

Audubon was on the verge of a sharp answer when it finally dawned on him what he had just seen Arthur do, summoning the geese. "You are, how do you say, a knack person, a caller of geese."

"Geese," Alvin offered helpfully.

Arthur shook his head. "I just like birds."

"I like birds too," said Audubon, "but they don't feel the same about me."

"'Cause you kill 'em and you ain't even hungry," said Arthur Stuart.

Audubon looked at him in utter consternation. At last he made his decision. "You can make a goose hold still for me?"

"I can ask him to. But you got to put the gun away."

Audubon immediately leaned it against a tree.

"Unload it," said Arthur Stuart.

"You think I break my promise?"

"You didn't make no promise," said Arthur Stuart.

"All right!" cried Audubon. "I promise upon the grave of my grandmother." He started unloading the gun.

"You promise what?" demanded Arthur.

Alvin almost laughed aloud, except that Arthur Stuart was so grim about it, making sure there were no loopholes through which Audubon could slip once Arthur brought the geese back.

"I promise, I shoot no geese! Pas de shooting of geese!"

"Not even powder shooting, whatever that is. No shooting any birds *all day*," Arthur said.

"Not 'powder,' you ignorant boy. *J'ai dit 'pas de.' Rien! No shooting of geese, that's what I say!"* In a mutter, he added, "*Tous les sauvages du monde sont ici aujourd'hui.*"

Alvin chuckled. "No shooting savages, either, if you don't mind."

Audubon looked at him, furious and embarrassed. "Parlez vous français?"

"Je ne parle pas français," said Alvin, remembering a phrase from the few halting French lessons Margaret tried before she finally gave up on getting Alvin to speak any language other than English. Latin and Greek had already been abandoned by then. But he did understand the word *savage*, having heard it so often in the French fort of Detroit when he went there as a boy with Ta-Kumsaw.

"C'est vrai," muttered Audubon. Then, louder: "I make the promise you say. Bring me a goose that stand in one place for my painting."

"You going to answer my questions?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"Yes, of course," said Audubon.

"A real answer, and not just some stupid nothing like adults usually say to children?"

"Hey," said Alvin.

"Not you," said Arthur Stuart quickly. But Alvin retained his suspicions.

"Yes," said Audubon in a world-weary voice. "I tell you all the secret of the universe!"

Arthur Stuart nodded, and walked to the point where the bank was highest. But before calling the geese, he turned to face Audubon one last time. "Where do you want the bird to stand?"

Audubon laughed. "You are the very strange boy! This is what you Americans call 'the brag'?"

"He ain't bragging," said Alvin. "He really has to know where you want the goose to stand."

Audubon shook his head, then looked around, checked the angle of the sun, and where there was a shady spot where he could sit while painting. Only then could he point to where the bird would have to pose.

"All right," said Arthur Stuart. He faced the river and babbled again, loudly, the sound carrying across the water. The geese rose from the surface and flew rapidly to shore, landing in the water or on the meadow. The lead goose, however, landed near Arthur Stuart, who led it toward the spot Audubon had picked.

Arthur looked at the Frenchman impatiently. He was just standing there, mouth agape, watching the goose come into position and then stop there, standing still as a statue. "You gonna draw in the mud with a stick?" asked Arthur.

Only then did Audubon realize that his paper and colors were still in his sack. He jogged briskly to the bag, stopping now and then to look back over his shoulder and make sure the goose was still there. While he was out of earshot, Alvin asked Arthur, "You forget we were leaving Philadelphia this morning?"

Arthur looked at him with the expression of withering scorn that only the face of an adolescent can produce. "You can go anytime you like."

At first Alvin thought he was telling him to go on and leave Arthur behind. But then he realized that Arthur was merely stating the truth: Alvin could leave Philadelphia whenever he wanted, so it didn't matter if it was this morning or later. "Verily and Mike are going to get worried if we don't get back soon."

"I don't want no birds to die," said Arthur.

"It's God's job to see every sparrow fall," said Alvin. "I didn't hear about him advertising that the position was open."

Arthur just clammed up and said no more. Soon Audubon was back, sitting in the grass under the tree, mixing his colors to match the exact color of the goosefeathers.

"I want to watch you paint," said Arthur.

"I don't like having people look over my shoulder."

Arthur mumbled something and the goose started to wander away.

"All right!" said Audubon frantically. "Watch me paint, watch the bird, watch the sun in the sky until you will be blind, whatever you want!"

At once Arthur Stuart muttered to the goose, and it waddled back into place.

Alvin shook his head. Naked exertion. How could this be the sweet-tempered child Alvin had known for so long?

Jean-Jacques Audubon soon forgot the strangeness of painting from a live bird and concentrated on colors and shapes. Arthur and Alvin both sat in the grass behind him, watching the goose come to life on the paper. To Arthur it was a kind of miracle. A dab here, a dab there, a streak, colors blending sometimes, sharp-edged in other places. And from this chaos, a bird.

From time to time the model grew weary. Arthur jumped up from the grass and spoke to the geese, and soon another took the place of the first, as close a match as he could find. Jean-Jacques cursed under his breath. "They are not the same bird, you know."

"But they're alive," said Arthur. "Look at the eyes."

Jean-Jacques only grunted. For the bird did look alive on the paper. Arthur whispered about it to Alvin, but Alvin's reply gave him no satisfaction. "How do you know he didn't make the dead birds look just as alive in his paintings?"

At last the painting was done. Jean-Jacques busied himself with putting away his colors and brushes, until Arthur called out to him, rather angrily. "Look here, Mr. Audubon!"

Jean-Jacques looked up. The goose was still there, not posed

anymore, but still on the ground, gazing intently at Arthur Stuart. "I'm finish with the goose, you can let it go." He turned back to his work.

"No!" Arthur Stuart shouted.

"Arthur," said Alvin softly.

"He's got to watch," said Arthur.

Sighing, Jean-Jacques looked up. "What am I watching?"

The moment Audubon's eyes were on him, Arthur clapped his hands and the goose ran and clumsily staggered into the air. But as soon as its wings were pulling against the air, it changed into a beautiful creature, turning the powerful beats of its wings into soaring flight. The other geese also rose. And Jean-Jacques, his weariness slipping from him, watched them fly over the trees.

"What grace," said Jean-Jacques. "No lady ever dances with so much beauty."

At that Arthur charged at him, furious.

"That's right! Them living birds are prettier than any of your damned old paintings!"

Alvin caught Arthur by the shoulders, held him, smiled wanly at Jean-Jacques. "I'm sorry. I never seen him act so mad."

"Every painting you ever made killed a bird," said Arthur. "And I don't care how pretty you paint, it ain't worth stopping the life of any of them!"

Jean-Jacques was embarrassed. "No one says this to me before. Men shoot their guns all the time, birds die every day."

"For meat," said Arthur. "To eat them."

"Does he believe this?" Jean-Jacques asked Alvin. "Do you think they are hungry and shoot the birds for food? Maybe they are stuffing it for trophy. Maybe they are shooting for *fiu*, you angry boy."

Arthur was unmollified. "So maybe they're no better than you. But I'd rather cut off my hand than kill a bird just to make a picture of it."

"All these hours you watch me paint, you admire my painting, no? And now you choose this moment and tout à coup you are angry?"

"'Cause I wanted you to see that bird fly. You painted it but it could still fly!"

"But that was because of your talking to the bird," said Jean-Jacques. "How can I know such a boy as you exist? I am oughting to wait for some boy to come along and make the bird pose? Until then I draw trees?"

"Who asked you to paint birds?"

"Is this the question you wanted to ask me?" said Jean-Jacques.

Arthur stopped short. "No. Yes. The way you stuffed them birds back in the shop, that showed me you *hate* the birds, you really see them, but then how can you kill them? You ain't hungry."

"I am often hungry. I am hungry right now. But it is not the bird I want to eat. Not goose today. What beautiful geese. You love them flying, and I love them flying, but in France nobody ever sees these birds. Other birds they see, not the birds of

America. Scientists write and talk about birds but they see only sketches, bad printing of them. I am not very good painter of people. Most of the people I do not like, and this makes my paintings not pretty to them. My people look like they are dead—*étoffées*—avec little glass eyes. But birds, I can paint them to be alive. I can find the colors, I see them there, and put them on the paper. We print, and now the scientists know, they open my book, with the American bird they never see. Now they can think about bird and they *see* them. God lets you to talk to birds, angry boy. He lets me to paint them. I should throw away this gift of God except today, when you are here to help me?"

"It ain't your gift when it's the bird as dies for it," said Arthur Stuart.

"All creatures die," said Jean-Jacques. "Birds live the lives of birds. All the same. It is a beautiful life, but they live in the shadow of death, afraid, watching, and then, boom! The gun. The talon of the hawk! The paws of the cat. But the bird I kill, I make it into the picture, it will live forever."

"Paint on paper ain't a bird," said Arthur Stuart sullenly.

Jean-Jacques' hand flashed out and gripped Arthur's arm. "Come here and say that to my picture!" He forced Arthur to stand over the open sketchbook. "You make me look at flying geese. Now you look!"

Arthur looked.

"You see this is beautiful," said Jean-Jacques. "And it teaches. Knowing is good. I show this bird to the world. In every eye, there is my bird. My goose is Plato's goose. Perfect goose. True goose. *Real* goose."

Alvin chuckled. "We aren't too clear on Plato."

Arthur turned scornfully to Alvin. "Miz Larner taught us all about Plato, lessen you was asleep that day."

"Was this the question you had for Mr. Audubon?" asked Alvin. "Asking why he thinks it's worth killing birds to paint them? 'Cause if it was, you sure picked a rude way to ask it."

"I'm sorry," said Arthur Stuart.

"And I think he gave you a fair answer, Arthur Stuart. If he was shooting birds and selling them to a poultreer you wouldn't think twice 'cause it's nature's way, killing and eating. It's all right to shoot a bird so some family can buy the carcass and roast it up and eat it gone. But if you just paint it, that makes him a killer?"

"I know," said Arthur Stuart. "I knew that right along."

"Then what was all this shouting for?" asked Alvin.

"I don't know," said Arthur. "I don't know why I got so mad."

"I know why," said Jean-Jacques.

"You do?" asked Alvin.

"Of course," said Jean-Jacques. "The geese do not like to die. But they cannot speak. They cannot, how you say, complain. So. You are the interpreter for birds."



Arthur Stuart had no answer for this. They walked in silence for a while, as the road led them to the outlying buildings and then quickly into the city, the ground turning into a cobbled street under them.

"I think of a question for you, King Arthur," said Jean-Jacques at last.

"What?" said Arthur, sounding far from enthusiastic.

"The sound you make, no goose ever make this sound. But they understand you."

"Wish you could have heard him when he was younger," said Alvin. "He sounded just like any bird you want."

"He lost this when his voice change? Getting low?"

"Earlier," said Alvin. He could not explain how he changed Arthur Stuart's body so that the Finders couldn't claim him. Though Jean-Jacques seemed a decent enough fellow, it would not be good to have any witness who could affirm that Arthur really was the runaway slave the Finders had been looking for.

"But my question," said Jean-Jacques, "is how you learn this language. You never *hear* this language, so how to learn it?"

"I do hear the language," said Arthur. "I'm talking their language right back to them. I just have a really thick human accent."

At this, Jean-Jacques burst out laughing, and so did Alvin. "Human accent," Jean-Jacques repeated.

"It ain't like the geese talk in words anyway," said Arthur. "It's more like, when I talk, I'm making the sound that says, Hi, I'm a goose, and then the rest of it says things like, everything's safe, or, quick let's fly, or, hold still now. Not words. Just...wishes."

"But there was a time," said Alvin, "when I saw you talking to a redbird and it told you all kinds of stuff and it wasn't just wishes, it was complicated."

Arthur thought about it. "Oh, that time," he finally said. "Well, that's 'cause that redbird wasn't talking redbird talk. He was talking English."

"English?" said Alvin, incredulous.

"With a really thick redbird accent," said Arthur. And this time all three of them laughed together.

As they neared Mistress Louder's boarding house, they could see a burly man bounding out into the street, then returning immediately through the garden gate. "Is that a man or a big rubber ball?" asked Jean-Jacques.

"It's Mr. Fink," said Arthur Stuart. "I think he's watching for us."

"Or is it Gargantua?" asked Jean-Jacques.

"More like Pantagruel," said Arthur Stuart.

Jean-Jacques stopped cold. Alvin and Arthur turned to look at him. "What's wrong?" asked Alvin.

"The boy knows Rabelais?" asked Jean-Jacques.

"Who's that?" asked Alvin.

"Alvin was asleep that day, too," said Arthur Stuart.

Jean-Jacques looked back and forth between them. "You and you have attend to school together?"

Alvin knew what Audubon must be thinking—that Alvin must be a duce to have gone to school at the same time as a child. "We had the same teacher," said Alvin.

"And she taught us in the same room at the same time," said Arthur Stuart.

"Only we didn't always get the same lesson," said Alvin.

"Yeah, I got Rabelais and Plato," said Arthur Stuart, "and Alvin married the schoolteacher."

Jean-Jacques laughed out loud. "That is so pleasant! Your wife is a schoolteacher but this slave boy is the top student!"

"Reckon so, except one thing," said Alvin. "The boy is free."

"Oh yes, I'm sorry. I mean to say, this Black boy."

"Half-Black," Arthur Stuart corrected him.

"Which make you half-White," said Jean-Jacques. "But when I look at you, I see only the Black half. Is this not curious?"

"When Black folks look at me," said Arthur Stuart, "they see only the White half."

"But the secret about you," said Jean-Jacques, "is that deep in your heart, you know Rabelais!"

"What does that have to do with Black and White?" asked Alvin.

"It have to do that all this Black and White just make this boy laugh inside. When you are laughing deep down where no one else can see, Rabelais is there. Yes, Arthur Stuart?"

"Rabelais," said Alvin. "Was that the book about the big huge fat guy?"

"So you did read it?"

"No," said Alvin. "I got embarrassed and gave it back to Miz Larmer. Margaret, I mean. You can't talk about things like that with a lady!"

"Ah," said Jean-Jacques. "Your schoolteacher began as Miz Larmer, but now she is Margaret. Next you will call her 'mama,' n'est ce pas?"

Alvin got a little tight-lipped at that. "Maybe you French folks like to read nasty books and all, but in America you don't go talking about a man's wife having babies."

"Oh, you plan to get them some other way?" Jean-Jacques laughed again. "Look, Pantagruel has seen us! He is coming to crush us!"

Mike Fink strode angrily toward them. "You know what damn time it is?" he called out.

People nearby looked at him and glared.

"Watch your language," Alvin said. "You want to get fined?"

"I wanted to get to Trenton before nightfall," said Mike.



"How, you got a train ticket?" asked Alvin.

"Good afternoon, Pantagruel. I am Jean-Jacques Audubon."

"Is he talking English?" asked Mike.

"Mike, this is John James Audubon, a Frenchman who paints birds. Jean-Jacques, this is Mike Fink."

"That's right, I'm Mike Fink! I'm half bear and half alligator, and my grandma on my mother's side was a tornado. When I clap my hands it scares lightning out of a clear sky. And if I want a bird painted, I'll pee straight up and turn the whole flock yellow!"

"I tremble in my boots to know you are such a dangerous fellow," said Jean-Jacques. "I am sure that when you say these things to ladies, their skirts fly up and they fall over on their backs."

Mike looked at him for a moment in silence. "If he's making fun of me, Alvin, I got to kill him."

"No, he was saying he thinks you make a fine speech," said Alvin. "Come on, Mike, it's me you're mad at. I'm sorry I didn't get back. I found Arthur Stuart pretty quick, but then we had to stay and help Mr. Audubon paint a goose."

"What for?" asked Mike. "Was the old colors peeling off?"

"No, no," said Jean-Jacques. "I paint on paper. I make a picture of a goose."

Before Alvin could explain that the former river rat was making a joke, Mike said, "Thanks for clearing that up for me, you half-witted tick-licking dolekey-faced baboon."

"Every time you talk I hear how much of English I have yet to learn," said Jean-Jacques.

"It wasn't Mr. Audubon's fault, Mike. It was Arthur Stuart who made us stay while he talked a goose into holding still. So Mr. Audubon could paint a picture without having to kill the bird and stuff it first."

"Well, that's fine with me," said Mike. "I'm not all that mad about it."

"You get more mad than this?" asked Jean-Jacques.

"None of you ain't seen me mad," said Mike.

"I have," said Alvin.

"Well, maybe a little bit mad," said Mike. "When you broke my leg."

Jean-Jacques looked at Alvin, seeing him in a new light, if he could break the leg of a man who did indeed seem to be half bear.

"It's Verily who's about ready to explode," said Mike.

"Verily?" asked Alvin, surprised. Verily Cooper hardly ever showed his temper.

"Yeah, he drummed his fingers on the table at lunch and on the porch he snatched a fly right out of the air and threw it at the house so hard it broke a window."

"He did?" asked Arthur Stuart, in awe.

"I said so, didn't I?" said Mike Fink.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot who was talking," said Arthur.

"Arthur and Mr. Audubon are hungry and thirsty," said Alvin. "You think you can take them in and see if Mistress Louder can get them a slab of bread and some water, at least?"

"Water?" said Audubon with a painted expression. "Do you Americans not understand that water can make you sick? Wine is healthy. Beer is good for you as long as you don't mind

making urine all the time. But water—you will get, what you call it, the piles."

"I been drinking water all my life," said Alvin, "and I don't get no piles."

"But this mean you are, how you say..." Then he rattled off a stream of French.

"Used to it," said Arthur, translating.

"Yes! Yooft a twit!"

"Used. To. It," Arthur repeated helpfully.

"English is the stupidest language on Earth. Except for German, and it is not a language, it is a head cold."

"You speak French?" Alvin asked Arthur Stuart.

"No," said Arthur, as if it were the dumbest idea in the world.

"Well, you understood Mr. Audubon."

"I guessed," said Arthur. "I don't even talk English all that good."

Right, thought Alvin. You can talk English any way you want to. You just *like* to break the rules and sound like this is your first day out of a deep-woods cabin.

"Come on in and get something to eat," said Mike. "And if you don't drink water, Mr. Odd Bone—"

"Audubon," Jean-Jacques corrected him.

"I hope hard cider will do the trick, 'cause I don't reckon Mistress Louder has anything stronger."

"Can I have some hard cider?" asked Arthur Stuart.

"No, but you can have a cookey," said Alvin.

"Hurrrah!"

"If she offers you one," said Alvin. "And no hinting."

"Mistress Louder always knows what a fellow's hungry for," said Arthur Stuart. "It's her knack."

Jean-Jacques laughed. "The food I am hungry for has never been served in this whole continent!"

"What do you mean?" said Mike Fink. "We got frogs and snails here."

"But you have no garlic."

"We got onions so strong they make you fart blue," said Mike. "And I tasted a Red man's peppercorn one time that made me think I was a fish and I woke up in the river."

"The food of France does nothing so wonderful. It *taste* so good that every day God send a saint down to Paris to bring him his dinner, but what does he know?"

They continued the bragging contest into the kitchen. But Alvin stopped off in the small parlor, where Verily sat comfortably with a book on his lap. He glanced at Alvin and then back down at the book.

"Oh, you're back," said Verily. "I assumed you had been killed and Arthur sold into slavery." He turned a page. "Next time, perhaps." He said it with no expression at all. Mike was right. Alvin had never seen Verily Cooper so mad.

"I'm sorry," Alvin said.

"All right, then," said Verily, setting down the book and rising to his feet. "Let's go." Verily walked toward the door.

"This late in the afternoon?" asked Alvin as he passed.

Verily stopped and looked at Alvin in feigned surprise. "Afternoon? So late? I had no idea."

"I said I'm sorry," said Alvin.

"I'm not like Peggy," said Verily. "I can't see your heartfire off in

the distance and assure myself that everything's all right. I just sit here waiting."

"I can't believe this," said Alvin. "You sound like a wife."

"I sound angry," said Verily. "I think it's interesting that in your mind this translates as 'sound like a wife.'"

"Now you sound like a lawyer," said Alvin.

"But you still sound like someone who thinks his life is so much more important than anyone else's that he can worry and inconvenience other people and all will be made right if he just says 'I'm sorry.'"

Alvin was stunned. "How can you say that? You know that's not how I feel."

"That's not what you say. But it's how you act."

"Sure, yes, maybe I do act like that. I'm on this journey trying to find out what this knock I have is for. I was told once that I'm supposed to build a Crystal City only I don't know what it is or how it's made. So I'm flailing around, changing my mind from day to day and week to week because I don't even know where to begin. Some tiny town calling itself Crystal City?"

"This is not about your choice of destination," said Verily.

"I know what it's about," said Alvin. "Your knock is as remarkable as mine. On top of that you're an educated man. So why are you wandering all over America, following a half-educated journeyman blacksmith who doesn't know where he's going?"

"That is precisely the question I've spent this whole day asking."

"Well, answer it," said Alvin. "Because if you want to be the center of your own life, then get on with it. Go away. The longer you follow me around the more you're going to get caught up in my life, and pretty soon all you'll be is the fellow who helped Alvin Smith build him a Crystal City."

"That's if you succeed in building it."

"Now we're to it, ain't we, Verily?" said Alvin. "It's worth it to tag along with me if I end up building the damn city. But what if I never figure it out? Then what's your life about?"

Verily turned his back on Alvin, but he didn't leave the room. He walked to the window. "Now I see," he said.

"See what?"

"I sat here getting angrier and angrier, and I thought it was because you were delaying our journey and hadn't sent word, and I talked myself into resenting the high-handed way you make decisions, but that was nonsense, because I'm free to leave any time. I'm with you by my own choice, and that includes being patient while you figure things out. So why was I angry?"

"Being angry isn't always for a reason that makes sense."

"Do you imagine you have to tell a lawyer that?" Verily laughed grimly. "I see now that I was really angry because I'm not in control of my own life. I've handed it over to you."

"Not to me," said Alvin.

"You're the one leading this expedition."

"You think just because you're not in charge of your own life right now, I must be in charge?" Alvin sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall. "I didn't give myself this knock. I didn't set the Unmaker to trying to kill me a dozen times over while I was growing up. I didn't cause myself to be born where this torch girl could see my future and use my birth cauld to save

my life every one of those times. I didn't choose to get all caught up with Tenskwa-Tawa, either—I was kidnapped by a bunch of Reds as was in caboots with Harrison. And when I do make a choice it's liable to blow up in my face. I figured out how to save Arthur from the Finders but what did it cost him? He can't do the voices anymore, not even the true voices of the birds. I'd give anything to put him back to rights, the way he was. And this golden plow, this living plow I found in the fire, that was the worst mistake of all, cause I don't know how to use it or what it's for. But I feel like it's got to make sense. There's got to be some purpose behind it. Some plan. Only I can't see what it's supposed to be. Not the future, not the present, not the past. And Margaret's no help neither, 'cause she sees too many futures and all she cares about is whether I'm dead, as if there's some future in which I don't die. Verily, you feel like you're getting led around on a string, but at least you can look at the other end of the string and see who's holding it."

"You," said Verily.

"And you can take it back if you want. You can go your own way. But me, Verily, who's holding my string? And how can I get away?"

Verily sank to his knees in front of Alvin and put his hands on Alvin's shoulders, then pulled him into an embrace. "You need a friend, and I'm nothing but a rag, Alvin."

"You're the friend I need, Verily, as long as you want to be," said Alvin.

They held each other for a long moment, both of them rejecting in the closeness, and both relieved that they hadn't lost it in the flaring of tempers of two strong-willed men.

"So we stay another night?" asked Verily.

"If Mistress Louder hasn't changed the sheets," said Alvin.

"She hasn't," said Verily. "She said she wouldn't till she saw you ride off."

"So she knew I wouldn't get away today?"

"She wished," said Verily. "You know she's set her cap for you."

"Don't be silly. She's twenty years older than me at least, and I'm a married man."

"Cupid shoots his arrows where they'll cause the most mischief," said Verily.

"She mothers me," said Alvin. "That's all it is."

"To you it feels like mothering," said Verily, "but to her it feels like wifing."

"Then let's get out of here tonight."

"The harm's already done," said Verily, "and she's not going to do anything about it, so why not stay tonight in a familiar bed?"

"And eat familiar food," said Alvin.

"Which I smell right now," said Verily.

"It's not even suppertime," said Alvin.

"How often a woman's love comes out as cookies."

"And how does a man's love show itself?" asked Alvin.

"Being there."

"That's all a woman can expect from a man?" Alvin chuckled, then turned grim. "The standard may be low, but I fail even that one. Margaret and I are leading separate lives, five hundred miles apart."

Verily gestured dismissively. "A Torch and a Maker can be together on separate continents."

Then Alvin understood what Verily meant. "But the reason you're with me—I'm supposed to believe that's pure loyalty and love?"

"My friend is on the adventure of his life. Besides, if you don't have a lawyer along, how will you stay out of jail?"

"Verily Cooper, if you think I'm going to believe that's why you're coming with me, think again, my friend."

"Oh?"

"You're coming along because this is the most exciting thing going on and you don't want to miss any of it."

"Exciting? Sitting here all day in the heat while you watch a Frenchman paint?"

"That's what made you mad," said Alvin. "You wanted to be there yourself to see Arthur talk them birds into posing."

Verily grinned. "Must have been a sight to see."

"For the first couple of minutes, maybe," Alvin yawned.

"Oh, that's right, your life is so boring," said Verily.

"No, I was just thinking that you would have gotten a lot bigger kick out of the way we broke into the taxidermist's shop and set free a bird that wasn't quite dead."

Verily paced around the room, orating. "That's it! Right there! This is intolerable! This is what makes me so angry! Leaving me out of everything fun! This is why you are the most irritating friend a man could have!"

"But Verily, I didn't know when I left the house that anything like that was going to happen."

"That's exactly my point," said Verily. "You don't know what's going to happen, and given what's happened to you your whole life, it is unreasonable—indeed it is unconscionable—for you to presume that any task you set out on will proceed without dangerous and fascinating consequences!"

"So what's your solution?"

Verily knelt before him and rested his hands on Alvin's knees. Nose to nose he said, "Always take me with you, dammit!"

"If Margaret's right," said Alvin, "there'll come a day when somebody succeeds in killing me. It won't be safe for them as stands too close."

At that moment Arthur Stuart walked into the room, eating a cookie, with half a dozen more stacked in his hand.

"If I'm there," said Verily to Alvin, "no harm will come to you."

"That's what Mike Fink promises, too," said Alvin. "But what I'm afraid of is you'll die trying."

Arthur Stuart laughed out loud, spraying cookie crumbs everywhere.

"What's so funny?" asked Verily.

"Nobody gets it," said Arthur Stuart.

"Gets what?" asked Alvin.

"None of us will be with Alvin when he dies."

They looked at him like he had just belched at a funeral.

Arthur Stuart rolled his eyes in exasperation. "When Alvin sees there's no way out, he'll make sure none of us are with him."

"Why would I do that?" asked Alvin.

"To make sure that when you're dead, there's somebody left to keep the Crystal City a-going."

They looked at Arthur in silence for a long moment.

"You have a peculiar imagination," said Verily.

"That's why Alvin's trying so hard to teach us all to be Makers," said Arthur Stuart. "So we won't need him anymore. So his work doesn't die when he does. So the thing he builds will last." Arthur polished off another cookie. With his mouth full, he grinned. "Anybody doesn't know that, don't know Alvin."

And that night, going to sleep, Arthur Stuart curled up in a ball next to him and Verily Cooper and Mike Fink already snoring on the bed they shared, Alvin kept trying to think what it meant that Arthur Stuart was thinking so mightily about Alvin's death.

It would have been nice just to figure that children didn't understand death, but Arthur Stuart was a child who understood the burden of death all too well, having had two mothers give their lives to save him from slavery. The boy must have spent a lot of time thinking about it. And the conclusion that he reached was that maybe you can't stop folks from dying, but when they do, you can at least carry on for them, make their sacrifice worthwhile.

And if you couldn't make their sacrifice worthwhile, then you better make sure they didn't die, because it was a sin to waste a death—even the death of a goose. ▲



About the author

Orson Scott Card is a six-time Hugo and Nebula award winner, and was honored with both awards in consecutive years for his novels *Ender's Game* and *Speaker for the Dead*—an accomplishment that remains unmatched.

Perhaps his most innovative work is his fantasy series "The Tales of Alvin Maker," which are set in a magical version of the American frontier. His new novel *Heartfire* is the fifth novel in that series.

"Gosers" represents his second appearance in *AMAZING Stories* as a fiction writer and his third appearance overall.

About the illustrator

Coincidentally, Tony DiTerlizzi and the famous naturalist painter, John James Audubon, have a bit in common medium-wise. Like Audubon, DiTerlizzi's illustrations are done in a mix of gouache, watercolor and pencil on bristol board. Tony's work can be seen in numerous places; from games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Magic: the Gathering* to books like *Greg Bear's Dinosaur Summer*. He is currently working on a children's book which will be published by Simon & Schuster next year. He can be reached at ditlerlizzi@aol.com.





the Mark of Zorro

BY
BEN
GOVA

nobody can consistently make money in the commodities market," she said, puffing hard. "The little bastard is cheating, some'ow."

"How?" I asked.

Wiping a rivulet of sweat from her brow, she answered, "That's what I want you to find out."

We were dangling on the sidelines of the volleyball court. The game is rather different in zero gravity. The net is circular, held in the middle of the court by hair-thin monofilament wires. Hit one of those wires, and it will slice you like a loaf of salami in a delicatessen.

The court itself is spherical, the curving walls hard and unpadded glassed. The ball can take strange bounces off those walls. So can the players.

There were hardly any spectators watching from the other side of the glassed. This was a private game, something of a grudge match, as a matter of fact.

Carole C. Chatsworth was a big, blonde, blowy Cockney who looked and sounded as if she belonged in some cheap burlesque show. Actually, she was a brilliant, hard-driving, absolutely ruthless bureaucrat who had worked her way to the top of the Interplanetary Security Commission's enforcement division.

And she was a cutthroat volleyball player, the kind who would slam you off the wall or push you into the wire if you got in her way.

She was also my boss, and she was convinced that Sam Gunn was illegally reaping a fortune on the commodities futures market.

"No one can be as lucky as that little sod," she told me, her eyes following the flying, sweating players. "E's rigging the market some'ow."

When C.C. gets an idea in her head, forget about trying to argue her out of it. The only two questions she'll put up with are: What do you want me to do? and How soon?

She had allowed herself to bloat up enormously in zero-g. The rumor was that she'd originally come up to this orbiting hotel when Sam Gunn owned it, and Sam had bedded her. Or maybe the other way around. After all, it was supposed to be a "honeymoon hotel" in those days. Sam's motto for the place was "If you like waterbeds, you'll love zero-g."

is the speed of
light different for
sam gunn than it is
for everyone else?
how else to explain
sam's uncanny knack
for playing the
market? that's what
zorro has to find
out....or else c.c.
will put her mark
on him!

ILLUSTRATION BY
JOHN K. SNYDER III

C.C. never went back Earthside. She moved the ISC headquarters to the hotel, actually got the Commission to buy half the orbital habitat to provide room for her staff's offices and living quarters. She was ready to bed down with Sam for life. But Sam pulled one of his disappearing acts on her, leaving her humiliated, furious, and certain that his only interest in her had been to get her to buy out his share of the hotel and run off to the asteroid belt with her money.

Maybe hell hath no fury like a woman jilted, but C.C. assuaged her anguish with food. She grew larger and larger, gobbling everything in sight, especially chocolate. Whenever a friend or a fellow bureaucrat or even a physician commented on her size, she laughed bitterly and said, "But I weigh exactly the same as when I first came up 'ere: zero!"

Now she looked like a lumpy dirigible in a soggy, stained sweat suit as she waited for her next turn in the volleyball competition.

"I thought we'd fixed the little bastard's wagon when I tried to sue the Pope," she muttered, watching the volleyball action with narrowed, piggy eyes. "But some'ow 'e's making 'imself rich in the futures market. 'E's cheating. I know 'e is."

I did not demur. It would have done no good, especially to my career.

"You're going to Selene City with the team that's auditing Sam's books," she told me. "Officially, you're one of the auditors. That'll be your cover."

My real job, she told me very firmly, was "to find out how that little cheating, womanizing, swindling scumbag of a deviant 'umper is rigging the commodities market."

So off I went to the Moon to find Sam Gunn.

ISUPPOSE I SHOULD INTRODUCE MYSELF. My name is Zoilo Hashimoto, the only son of a Japanese-American construction engineer and a Cuban baseball player whose career was cut short by her pregnancy with me. Dad was killed before I was born in the great tsunami that wiped out the hotel complex he was building on Tarawa. Mom returned to baseball as an umpire after her second marriage broke up, which was after my four sisters were born. She was known as a strict enforcer of the rules on the field. Believe me, she was just as strict at home.

could safely retire after twenty years of police work with enough of a pension to follow my one true passion: archeology. I longed to help search for the ancient cities that were being unearthed on Mars (pardon the unintentional pun). I was never a street officer; the robots had taken over such dangerous duties by the time I graduated college with my degree in criminology. Instead, I specialized in tracking down financial crooks. I worked with computers and electronic ferrets rather than guns and stun wands.

But enough about me. Let me tell you how I met Sam Gunn.

IDUTIFULLY WENT TO THE MOON, to Sam's corporate headquarters at Selene City, foolishly expecting Sam to be there, especially with a team of ISC auditors combing through his records. But Sam wasn't, of course.

He was out at a new solar power satellite that was just going on-line to provide fifteen gigawatts of electrical power to the growing industrial cities of central Asia.

Years earlier Sam had been one of the first to go out to the asteroids to mine their metals and minerals. He had amassed a considerable fortune and a fleet of ore-processing factory ships. But then disaster struck and he lost it all. In desperation he had tried to sue the Pope, and although he got what he wanted without going to trial, he quickly lost it all. C.C. Chatsworth had been a major force in seeing to it that Sam was broken and humiliated.

But now he was getting rich again. In the commodities market, of all places.

Sam's present company was in business to service and maintain several solar power satellites and other facilities in Earth orbit and on the Moon. And he was out at the newest of the suns, rather than in his offices in Selene City.

I was reluctant to go the satellite to meet him. Those huge suns ride in geosynchronous orbit, nearly thirty-six thousand kilometers above the equator, on the fringes of the outer Van Allen Belt. There's a lot of ionizing radiation out there, and I didn't like the idea of living in it, even inside a shielded space suit.

But that's where Sam was, and that's where I had to go. Or face the sizable wrath of the sizable C.C. Chatsworth.

So I rode an OTV (orbital transfer vehicle, to landlubbers) from Selene to Sunsat Seventeen. An OTV is the most utilitarian

"....never seen such a collection of misbegotten, ham-handed,

Somewhere in my genetic heritage must have been a basketball player, for despite the diminutive size of my parents I am nearly two meters tall—six feet, five inches in old-fashioned English units.

I have been told I am handsome, with deep brown eyes and high cheekbones that make me look decidedly oriental. Yet I have never been very successful with women. Perhaps I am too shy, too uncertain of myself. I once tried to grow a beard, but it looked terrible, and the unwritten dress code of the ISC demands clean-shaven men. The unwritten rules are always the important ones, of course.

I had started my career in law enforcement, figuring that I

ian of utility vehicles, nothing more than a collection of tankage, cargo containers, crew pod, and engines.

I sat crammed behind the two pilots during the whole nine-hour trip, staring out the curving port of the crew pod, watching the graceful blue and white sphere of Earth grow and grow until it was a massive, curving, dazzling presence of overwhelming beauty, deep blue oceans and resplendent white clouds, wrinkled old mountains with horny fingers of snow clutching their crests. Even the sprawling cities looked almost pretty from this vantage point.

Then the sunset swung into view, blocking out everything else, huge and square and so close that my heart clutched in my

chest; I thought we were going to plunge right into it.

It was ten kilometers long and six kilometer across, a huge flat expanse of solar cells that drank in sunlight and converted it silently to electricity. Off at one end were the magnetrons that transformed the electricity into microwave energy, and the big steerable antennas that beamed the microwaves to receiving antenna farms on Earth.

I had expected the sunsat to glitter and gleam, like a jewel or a huge light in the sky. Instead it was dark and silent, greedily soaking up sunlight, not reflecting it.

Except down at the end where the magnetrons were. They were sparkling and flashing spectacularly, blue electrical snakes writhing all across them, shooting off brilliant lightning flashes into the dead black emptiness of space. It was all in eerie silence, naturally, but in my mind I could imagine the crackling and hissing of gigawatts of electricity straining to get loose.

"Nothing to be alarmed about," said the OTV pilot over his shoulder to me, shooed me behind him. The man's voice was decidedly quivering. "Besides, we'll be docking several kilometer away from that mess."

He docked us at the port on the shaded underside of the sunsat, where the so-called living quarters were. There were only three people there, two Asian women and a frowning, bearded, bald, portly European man. They all looked nervous, worried. Much to my consternation, the OTV pulled away and headed back for the Moon as soon as it detached its cargo pods. Its crew never waited to find out if I wanted to return with them.

I was informed by the worried-looking trio that Sam was "up topside," working with the technicians who were trying to fix the "transient" that was afflicting the magnetrons.

They pulled a space suit out of a locker, and before I realized what was happening they were stuffing me into it. The suit was brand new and stiff; it smelled of freshly cured plastic and cleaning oils, like a new car. Believe it or not, in those days it was difficult to find a suit that would fit someone as tall as I. This one barely did; my fingers were cramped in the gloves, my toes crunched uncomfortably into the boots. I felt as if I had to stoop to keep the suit from popping open on me.

Once I was suited up they hustled me to the access tube that led up and out to the sunlit side of the satellite.

I had been in space suits before, they saw that on my dossier,

Yes, there are patches and pills you can take. Biofeedback training, too. Still, most people want to barf when they first experience zero-g. Not me. I find it exhilarating, right from the first moment.

So I swam weightlessly the length of the access tube and opened the hatch at its other end. Stepping out onto the broad, flat surface of the sunsat was something like stepping from a cool, darkened room into the full brilliance of a blazing Arizona summer afternoon.

My suit creaked and groaned from the sudden heat load of the Sun's unfiltered fury. I heard the fans whir up and the pumps gurgle. But none of that mattered. The scenery was too breathtaking to care about anything else.

I was standing on a wide, flat expanse of dark, glassy solar panels. Actually, I was standing in an aisle between rows of panels. The sunsat was a world of its own, a world that stretched for kilometers in every direction, row upon row of panels so dark they looked almost like emptiness, like the void of space itself. Between the rows, however, metal strips of aisles glinted in the brilliant sunlight.

I could not see the Earth; it was on the satellite's other, shaded, side. For all I could see, I was alone in the universe on this giant raft of solar panels, just me and the distant stars and the blazing Sun with its pulsing, glowing corona and a halo of zodiacal light extending on either side of it.

For the first time in my life I felt a dizzying surge of vertigo. It took me several moments to catch my breath. Then I remembered what I was here for, and tapped the keypad at my wrist to turn on the suit-to-suit radio frequency.

"...never seen such a collection of misbegotten, ham-handed, undertrained, overpaid jerkoffs in my whole life! Don't you guys know *anything*? Where'd you get your degrees, Genghis Dumb University?"

Those were the first words I heard Sam Gunn speak.

I attached my tether to the guard rail and started slowly toward the end of the sunsat where six space-suited figures were hovering off to one side of the sparkling, sputtering magnetrons like a half-dozen toy balloons tethered to various guard rails. In their midst was one stumpy little figure, bobbing up and down like a Mexican jumping bean on amphetamines, literally at the

underbrained, overpaid jerkoffs in my whole life!..."

so they felt no qualms about sending me outside alone with only the barest briefing on how to attach the suit's tether to one of the guard rails that ran the length of the satellite, between the rows of solar panels.

They told me which radio frequencies were which, and left me at the hatch of the access tube. I nodded to them from inside my helmet, went through the hatch, and started to pull myself weightlessly along the rungs set into the curving inner wall of the tube.

I am one of those fortunate few who have never been bothered by weightlessness. Practically everyone gets queasy at first, a fact that ruined Sam's original plan for his honeymoon hotel.

end of his tether.

"Eleven billion dollars to build this pile of junk," Sam was yelling, "and all of it's going down the toilet because nobody here knows how to shut down a stupid, frigging power bus!"

"Ah...Mr. Gunn?" I said into my helmet microphone.

He paid no attention. He kept up his tirade, describing in considerable detail the physical, mental, and moral shortcomings of the technicians surrounding him, their families, their friends, their entire gene pool, even their herds of goats and sheep.

"Mr. Gunn!" I bellowed.

"...never been smart enough to wipe your own—*What?*" he

snarled, turning in my direction.

"I am Zoilo Hashimoto, from—"

"Leapin' lizards, Sandy!" Sam exclaimed. "It's Zorro, come to right wrongs and carve a zee into my chest!"

"Zoilo," I corrected. I might as well have saved my breath.

"That's what we need around here. The masked avenger. The mark of Zorro. You can start by transplanting some brains into these zombies."

The six spacesuited technicians simply hung on their tethers, silent as corpses, unmoving and apparently unmoved by Sam's insults.

"Would you believe," Sam said to me, "that they sent me the only six techs in all of Asia that can't speak English? They expect me to talk to them in Sanskrit or whatever."

"That must be frustrating," I said.

"Not all that bad." I detected a grin in his voice. "I can call them anything that pops into my head, and they don't take offense...as long as I stick to English."

Then he whirled back toward them and unleashed a blast of heavily accented Japanese that galvanized the technicians into frenzied action. I understood a little of what he said, and I have no intention of repeating it.

It took the better part of two hours, but Sam finally got the electrical sparking stopped. He had to do the toughest part of the job by himself; the technicians either could not or would not go within fifty meters of the crackling blue fireworks. I had to hang there like a lanky sausage, with nothing to do but watch Sam work while I worried about how much radiation I was absorbing.

When the sparking finally stopped, however, the six technicians began dismantling the magnetron with the intense purposefulness of a team of ants tearing into a jelly doughnut that someone had carelessly dropped.

"C'mon," Sam said, pulling himself along the guide rail toward me, "let's go back inside, Zorro."

"Zoilo," I corrected.

"Yeah, sure."

As we headed for the tube hatch I tried to make some conversation. "How much time do you spend outside like this?"

"Too damned much," Sam snapped.

live and close up was different: he looked more animated, livelier. And his eyes seemed to twinkle with the awareness that he knew things I didn't.

Sam's space suit looked grimy, hard-used. Its torso and helmet were covered with corporate logos and mission patches, everything from *Vacuum Cleaners Inc.* to an ancient, faded *Space Station Freighter*. Several emblems puzzled me: one that said *Keep the baby, Faith*, and another that looked like the gaudily striped flattened sphere of the planet Jupiter with four little stars beside it and the word *Raeuer* beneath.

"C'mon," Sam said. "Lemme show you where you'll be sleeping tonight."

"Don't you want to know why I'm here?" I asked.

He gave me an exaggerated frown. "I know why you're here. C.C. wants to pin my balls to her office wall, right?"

It was clear that he understood exactly why I had come; no cover story was necessary with Sam. So I nodded, then realized that Sam was at eye level with me, despite the fact that I was almost a foot taller than he. I had unconsciously slipped my feet into the floor loops, to anchor myself down. Sam, on the other hand, floated free and bobbed weightlessly beside me.

"Why is it," he asked the empty air, "that when a little guy makes some money, everybody in the goddamned government wants to investigate him?"

"Mr. Gunn," I started to explain, "you have had an extremely—"

"Call me Sam," he snapped.

"Very well. You may call me Zoilo."

"I already do, Zorro."

"Zoilo."

"I still can't figure out why the double-dipped ISC is worried about my good luck on the com-modities market."

"Ms. Chatsworth is concerned that more than good luck may be involved," I replied.

He grinned at me, a gap-toothed grin of pure boyish glee.

"She thinks I'm cheating!"

He said it with such wide-eyed innocence that I was left speechless.

Sam laughed and said, "C'mon, let's get some shut-eye. The next OTV won't be here until tomorrow afternoon."

He floated down the corridor, propelling himself with deft

Sam was chipper. "What's a matter, Zorro," he asked,

"I mean, the radiation levels—"

"That's why I wear a lead jockstrap, pal."

I thought he was joking. Years later I found out that he wasn't.

I followed him back to the access tube and down to the office/habitat area. The worried trio I had met earlier was nowhere in sight, although where they could hide in the narrow confines of the office/habitat area was beyond me.

We stopped in front of the space suit lockers and began to work our way out of our suits. Once Sam lifted off his helmet, I took a good look at him. I had seen videos and stills of him, naturally. I knew that round, snub-nosed face with its bristling rust-red hair almost as well as I knew my own. Yet seeing him

touches of his fingers against the metal walls. I pulled my stocking feet out of the floor loops and clambered hand over hand after him, using the grips that studded the walls.

To say that the personnel quarters aboard *Sunset Seventeen* were spartan would be an understatement. They consisted of a row of lockers, nothing more. A mesh sleeping cocoon was fastened to one side, a fold-down sink on the other. There was an electrical outlet and a data port for connecting a computer. The locker was barely tall enough for me to squeeze into it; I had to keep my chin pressed down on my chest.

The next morning I groaned as I unfolded myself out in the corridor. Sam, on the other hand, was chipper and as bright as a

new-minted penny.

"What'samatter, Zoero," he asked, almost solicitously, "you in pain or something?"

Stretching in an effort to ease the crick in my neck, I explained that the privacy booths were too cramped for comfort.

"Gee," Sam said, bouncing lightly off the floor to rise to eye level with me, "I always thought they were really spacious."

Over breakfast in the minuscule galley I asked, "Why are you here, Sam, instead of in your office in Selene City? Surely you can hire engineers to supervise the work here."

He gave me a sour look as he spooned up oatmeal. "Yeah, sure. I can hire the entire graduating class of MIT if I want to."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because every engineer I hire costs me money, and money is something I don't have much of, that's why."

"But the High Asia Sunsat Combine must be paying at least minimum rates for your maintenance contract."

He chewed thoughtfully for a moment; the oatmeal was that lumpy. Then he swallowed and said, "Nobody would sign a contract with S. Gunn Enterprises unless our bid was considerably *under* standard rates. Your sweetheart Ms. Chatsworth has seen to that."

"But that's illegal. It's restraint of . . ." My voice trailed off as I realized the import of what he was telling me.

"C.C. and her connections in the government saw to it that I got screwed out of my old corporation. She's got a vendetta going against me. The only work I can find is these crappy maintenance contracts, and even then I've got to do it at a helluva lot less than standard pay."

I heard myself ask weakly, "Well, how many contracts do you have?"

"Six, right now. Three sunsats, a couple of orbiting astronomical telescopes, and the laundry facility at the new retirement center in Selene City."

"Laundry?"

He laughed bitterly. "Great job for a pioneer, isn't it? Washing old folks' dirty sheets."

Sam had truly been a pioneering entrepreneur, I knew. The zero-goo hotel, the first asteroid mining expedition, even the early work of cleaning debris out of the low-orbit region around

"The everything," Sam exclaimed. "The hardware's crappy. The technicians don't know what they're doing. And I'm supposed to make it all come out peachy keen."

"In the meantime, though," I pointed out, "you're piling up quite a fortune in the commodities market."

He toyed with the oatmeal remaining in his bowl. "Am I?" he asked softly.

"According to our records, you certainly are."

Sam sighed mightily, like a man weary of being dragged down by lesser mortals. "I've been pretty lucky, I guess. In the market, I mean."

From the gleam in Sam's eye, I knew he was enjoying the fact that C.C. was annoyed enough to send me to investigate him. He certainly did not appear to be worried about my presence. Not in the slightest.

After breakfast I retired to my locker and plugged in my pocket computer, scrunching myself up close to its tiny microphone so that my lips almost touched it. I didn't want Sam to hear me.

All that morning and right through lunch I searched through Sam's records. Not that I hadn't before, but now I was looking specifically into his transactions in the commodities market. There was a pattern to be found; there always is, in any crooked scheme. Find the pattern and you find the crook.

It quickly became clear that Sam was buying and selling almost exclusively in the metals market: meteoric iron and precious metals, mostly. He speculated on the cargoes bound inward from the asteroid belt on the factory ships, guessing which ships would return laden with profitable cargoes and which would not. He was right ninety-three percent of the time, an impossible score for pure luck.

The commodities futures market was a crapshoot, and like all gambles, the odds were stacked against the gambler. Yet Sam was beating those odds a staggering ninety-three percent of the time. Impossible, unless he was cheating somehow.

You see, there were a huge number of variables in each mission out to the asteroids, too many for anyone to guess right ninety-three percent of the time. Or even fifty-three percent of the time, for that matter.

There were thousands of independent miners out there in the asteroid belt, hunting down usable asteroids, chunks of metals

almost solicitously, "you in pain or something?"

Earth—he had been the trailblazer. Now he was reduced to maintenance contracts, and hiring fourth-rate technicians because he couldn't afford better.

Yet... somehow he was getting rich in the commodities futures market.

"Well," I said, "at least maintenance contracts provide a steady income."

"Oh yeah, sure." A frown puckered his brows. "They're usually safe and easy, all right. But this bunch of clowns trying to operate Sunsat Seventeen are making this particular job a pain in the butt."

"The magnetrons?"

and minerals that could be mined profitably. The factory ships went out on Hohmann transfer orbits, using the minimum amount of energy, spending the least amount of money to reach a destination in the belt.

Picking the right destination was crucial. No sense spending a year in space to arrive at a spot where no miners and no ore were waiting for you. Rendezvous points and times were selected beforehand, but a thousand unforeseen factors could ruin your plans. Usually the small mining teams auctioned off their ores to the highest bidder. But often enough they decided not to wait for you because somebody else showed up with ready credits for the ores.

All these factors were heavily influenced by timing and distance. The asteroid belt is mostly empty space, even though millions of asteroids are floating out there between Mars and Jupiter. Think of megatrillions of cubic kilometers of nothingness, with a few grains of dust drifting through the void: That's what the so-called "belt" is like.

It takes propulsion energy—which means money—to maneuver in space, to move the millions of kilometers between usable asteroids. The miners were mostly small-time independent operators who were always short on funds; they were always willing to take immediate credits instead of waiting for your particular factory ship to reach the rendezvous point you were aiming for.

There were more pending lawsuits over broken contracts for one deliveries than there were divorce cases on Earth. The miners evaded the law, by and large, because it cost a corporation more to catch and fine them than the fines could possibly return. Besides, fining a miner was a study in frustration anyway. Most of them simply declared bankruptcy and started up again under a new name.

All this made the commodities market an arena fraught with uncertainty. How do you know which factory ship will come back with a rich cargo of metals or minerals? How can you guess what such cargoes will be worth on the market, when it takes a year or more for the factory ship to make the return journey to Earth?

The answer is, you wait as long as you possibly can before you invest your money (or, more accurately, make your bet). The safest thing to do is to wait until a factory ship has actually taken on a specific cargo of metals, check with the price of such metals on the futures market, and only then sink your money into that particular ship.

So investors waited eagerly for communications from the various factory ships. It takes more than half an hour for a message to travel from the belt to the Earth/Moon system. There's no way around that time lag. Even moving at the speed of light as they do, electronic or optical laser messages average about thirty minutes to cover the distance between the belt and the Earth/Moon region.

As soon as a favorable message is received, investors start bidding up the price of that ship's cargo.

each day I received a phone call from c.c., her

But some investors, the ones with more guts than brains, put their money into a ship's cargo before the good word comes from the asteroid belt. They bet that the news will be good before the news is received. Most of those investors quickly go broke.

Sam Gunn invested that way. And he was not going broke. Far from it. He was getting rich.

There was no way for him to do that legally. Of that, C.C. Chatsworth was convinced. So was I. But I had to find out how he was cheating the system. Or face the wrath of C.C. She was determined to put somebody's testicles on her office wall. If she couldn't get Sam's, she'd take mine.

The OTV duly arrived and carried Sam and me back to

Selene. The city was almost entirely underground, as all lunar cities were in those days. Even the imposing grand plaza, as long as six football fields with a dome of seventy-five meters height, was totally enclosed, except for the huge, curved glasssteel windows at its far end.

The plaza was grassed and landscaped and dotted with flowering shrubbery, however, so it looked very Earthlike even though the fight lunar gravity allowed tourists to soar like birds on big, colorful plastic wings they rented.

The ISC was paying for a minimum-sized studio apartment at the government-rented set of rooms on Level One, barely large enough for a bed, minikitchen and phone booth-sized bathroom. I had to hunch over to squeeze into the shower.

Sam, on the other hand, ensconced me in a spacious office next to his own, in the imposing headquarters tower of Moonbase Inc., where he had rented space for his own S. Gunn Enterprises. I was surprised that his offices were so spacious, until I realized that he slept in his own office and saved himself the cost of an apartment. It was strictly against the building's regulations, of course, but somehow Sam managed to get away with it.

I spent days digging into the personnel files of each and every individual who might be tipping Sam off about ore shipments from the asteroid belt. Using the ISC's powers of subpoena, I investigated their personal financial records. I could find nothing that hinted at bribery or collusion.

Besides, how could anyone tip Sam before the rest of the market? The news from the factory ships traveled at the speed of light from the asteroid belt to the Earth/Moon system. There was no way around that.

Evenings I spent with Sam. He wined and dined me as if I were a long-lost brother or a wealthy potential customer. He even found dates for me, lovely young women who seemed more interested in Sam than in me. But nevertheless, Sam saw to it that I was not lonely at Selene. I knew he was trying to bribe me, or at least make me feel that he was a fine person and incapable of chicanery. Yet I began to realize how lonely, how empty, my life had been up to that point. Being with Sam was fun!

On the other hand, each day I received a phone call from C.C., her quivering, jowled face grimacing at me angrily. "Are you nailed 'im yet?" she would demand. Each day she grew angrier, her fleshy face redder. It got so bad that I stopped

taking all incoming calls. But she called anyway and left messages of rage that escalated daily.

I became so desperate that I asked him point blank, "How do you do it, Sam?"

"Do what?"

"Cheat the market."

We were in Selene's finest restaurant, Moonglow, waiting for our evening's companions to show up. The restaurant was deep underground, rather than in the plaza. On the Moon, where the airless surface is bathed in deadly radiation and peppered by meteoric infall, the deeper below ground you are, the more your prestige. Moonglow was on Selene's bottom level, where the

executives kept their own plush quarters.

The restaurant was several stories high, however. The volume had originally been an actual cave; now it was occupied by tiers of dining tables covered with the finest napery and silverware made from asteroidal metal. No two tables were on the same level. Each one stood on a pedestal atop an impossibly slim column of shining stainless steel while curving ramps twined between them. On Earth, the human waiters and buslers would have been exhausted after an hour's work. Here in the low gravity of the Moon, they could work four-hour shifts with comparative ease. Still, one tipped generously at Moonglow.

"Cheat the market?" Sam put on such a look of hurt innocence that I had to laugh.

"Come on, Sam," I said. "You know that you're cheating and I know that you know."

He blinked his eyes several times. They were green now. I could have sworn they'd been blue. But Sam was wearing a trim leisure suit of forest green, and his eyes almost matched his attire. Contact lenses? I wondered.

"How could I possibly cheat the market?" he asked.

"That's what I'd like to know," I said.

Sam broke into a boyish grin. "Look, Zorro old pal, your ISC auditors have been plowing through my company's files for more than a week now. They've even snooped into my personal accounts. What have they found?"

"Nothing," I admitted.

"You know why?" he asked, with a devilish cock of one eyebrow.

"Why?"

"Because there's nothing to find. I'm as pure as the driven snow. Clean as a whistle. Spotless. Unblemished. Unsullied. Right up there with the Virgin Mary—well, maybe not *that* unsullied. But you'll have to find another chest to carve your zee into."

I had given up long ago on getting him to pronounce my name correctly. To him I was Zorro, and there was no use wasting energy trying to change him.

In truth, I was getting to like Sam. He was enjoying this fencing, I saw. He liked to talk; he even seemed to enjoy listening to me talk. I found myself telling him about my boyhood in Cuba and my longing to explore the buried cities of Mars.

quivering, jowled face grimacing at me angrily.

"Archeology, hey?" he mused. "Lots of good-looking women students. Lonely outposts far from civilization." He nodded happily. "Could be a good life, Zorro."

Sam was especially enjoying the fact that I was living on an ISC expense account, running up a huge dent in C.C.'s budget. That's why he insisted that we dine at Moonglow. There was no more expensive restaurant in the Solar System.

After that fruitless (although thoroughly enjoyable) dinner, I decided to cherchez les femmes. Sam was wooing half a dozen women simultaneously, and avoiding several others—including a judge of the World Court, a former United States Senator, Jill Meyers.

I found that although several of Sam's "dates" loathed most of the other women he was pursuing, none of them had a harsh word to say about Sam himself.

"I know he plays around," said a lean, lanky young redhead from Colorado who was working at Selene as a tour guide. She shrugged it off. "I guess that's part of what makes him so interesting—you never know what he's going to do next."

An older, wiser Chinese woman who operated excavating equipment up on the surface told me "Sam is like lightning: He never hits the same place twice." Then she smiled sagely and added, "Unless you put out something that attracts him."

The typical reaction was that of a grinning, curly-haired Dutch blonde: "At least he's not a bore! Sam's always a lot of fun, even if he does exasperate you sometimes."

I would not get any useful information from his lovers. They had no useful information to give me.

It was frustrating, to say the least. Somehow, Sam knew what the factory ships were bringing back toward Earth before the information was received on Earth. But that was impossible. The ships broadcast their information in the clear; no coded messages were allowed. The messages were received by the ISC's own communications satellite and immediately relayed to every receiving antenna in the Earth/Moon system at the same time. All right, when the Moon was in the right part of its orbit, receivers on the Moon might catch the incoming messages a second and a half sooner than receivers on Earth. So what? That made no real difference. The Moon lagged a second and a half behind when it was on the other side of its orbit. I repeat, So what?

Yet, just to make certain, I ran a correlation of Sam's right "guesses" with the position of the Moon in its orbit. Nothing. It made no difference whether the Moon was a second and a half ahead or behind.

Sam was enjoying my frustration. We became buddies, of a sort. He pulled me away from my desk time and again to show me around Selene, take me for walks up on the surface, even escort me to the gambling casino at Hell Crater and treat me to a pile of chips—which I promptly lost. Dice, roulette, baccarat, even the slot machines—it made no difference, I lost at them

all, much to Sam's glee.

I began to clutch at straws. Somehow, I knew—I knew—Sam was getting the incoming messages from the factory ships before the rest of the Earth/Moon system. He could make his buying decisions based on advanced knowledge, of that I was certain. That meant that he was receiving those messages sooner than everyone else. In turn, that meant that the speed of light was not the same for Sam as it was for everyone else.

I was challenging Einstein; that's how crazy Sam was making me.

He had somehow rigged the speed with which those messages traveled from the asteroid belt to Earth. But that was

impossible! The speed of light is the one immutable factor in all of Einstein's relativity. It can't be changed. It travels at one speed in vacuum and one speed only. Sam couldn't slow it down or speed it up.

Or—if he could—why would he be wasting his time playing the commodities market? He could be opening up the path to interstellar travel!

In desperation I asked my computer to search for any correlations it could discern in all of Sam's market transactions. Anything at all.

The list that scrolled across my screen was even more frustrating than my other failed ideas. There were plenty of correlations, but none of them made any sense. For example, Sam's buys of metals futures seemed to follow some astrological pattern: the computer actually worked out a pattern in which Sam's investments correlated with the astrological signs for the days in which he made his buys.

Sam sold his futures, of course. That's how he made money. He bought when the price was low, before most other investors dared to risk their money. Then he waited until the price for that particular cargo rose, and sold it off at a handsome profit. While his buys had that weird astrological correlation, his sales did not; they were strictly related to the market price for the metals.

I was losing weight, worrying over this problem. And I started to have bad dreams, nightmares in which C.C. Chatsworth was fiendishly slicing me into thin sections on those volleyball wires, cackling insanely while my blood floated all around me in zero-gravity bubbles.

Sam, strangely enough, was very solicitous, fussing over me like a distraught uncle.

"You gotta eat better, Zorro," he told me as I picked at my dinner.

We were back at the Moonglow. Sam had just returned from another quick trip to Sunsat Seventeen. The magnetrons were still giving trouble. Sam grumbled about the Asian consortium's insistence that seventy-five percent of the satellite's hardware had to be manufactured in Asia.

"And not the Pacific Rim countries, where they know how to build major hardware," he groused. "Not Japan or even China."

Despite my growing despair, I went for his bait. "Then where is the hardware being built?" I asked.

click. click. click. those facts meshed together. they

Sam frowned from across the circular dining table. "Upper Clucksville, from the looks of it. Afghanistan, Tzadikistan, Dumbhellistan—guys who had trouble making oxcarts are now building klystrons and power busses and I'm stuck with a contract that says I've gotta make it all work right or it comes outta my profits!"

"Why did you ever agree to such a contract?" I wondered out loud.

"Outta the goodness of my heart," said Sam, placing a hand on his chest. "Why else?"

A bell rang in my mind.

Sam was gone the next morning, back to the same Sunsat

Seventeen. I went up to my roomy office and immediately got to work. Ignoring the pretty view of the plaza's greenery and the Olympic-sized swimming pool where young tourists were doing quintuple flips in lunar slow-motion from the thirty-meter diving platform, I booted up my computer and started checking out the hunch that had popped into my mind the night before.

In the back of my mind it occurred to me that Sam had generously given me this office next to his own so that he could keep an eye on me. He probably had the desktop computer bugged, too, so he could see what I was looking into. So I used my trusty old palm-sized machine, instead. It was slower, because it had to access files stored back on Earth and that meant a second-and-a-half lag. But using Sam's computer would have been foolish, I thought.

Yes! I was right. Every time Sam made a successful buy on the futures market, he was in orbit, not on the Moon. Almost. He made a few buys from his office here in Selene City, as well, but they were sometimes winners, more often losers. When he called in his buys from orbit they were winners, every time except once, and that once happened when a factory ship broke down months after Sam's purchase of its cargo of industrial steel; the cargo was almost a year late in reaching the market. Everyone lost money on that one.

His sell orders came from Selene, from orbit, from wherever he happened to be. But his successful buys, the ones that were making him rich, always came from orbit.

I was so excited by this discovery that it wasn't until late that afternoon that the reaction hit me. So what? So Sam makes his buy decisions while he's working in orbit, instead of when he's on the Moon. What does that prove?

It didn't prove anything, I realized. It certainly reinforced the idea that Sam was cheating the system, somehow. But how he was doing it remained a mystery.

I felt terribly let down. As if I had spent every bit of my energy trying to break down a solidly locked door, only to find that the room beyond that door was totally empty.

I sat at the desk Sam had loaned me, staring out at the scantily clad tourists performing athletic feats that were impossible on Earth, feeling completely drained and exhausted. In my mind's eye I saw C.C. roasting me over the coals of bureaucratic

wrath. And Sam grinning at me like a gap-toothed Jack-o'-lantern, knowing that he had outsmarted me.

I should have been angry with Sam. Furious. The little trickster was ruining my career, my life. Yet I just couldn't work up the rage. Sam had been kind to me. I knew it had all been in his own self-interest, but the little wiz guy had actually behaved as if we were real friends.

Nevertheless, I had to get to the bottom of this. Sam was cheating, and it was my job to nail him. Or I would be nailed myself.

I hauled myself up from the desk chair and headed for Selene's spaceport, checking my palm computer for the depar-

ture time of the next OTV heading for Sunsat Seventeen.

I'm going to catch him in the act, I told myself. He's not going to outsmart me any longer.

When I finally arrived at the sunset, he was outside again, working with the same team of technicians while the same trio of engineers gave me worried frowns and mumbles as I pulled on the same slightly too small space suit.

"Sam told us we should stay inside," said one of the women engineers.

"He said it's going to be real hairy topside," the other one added.

The bald, bearded man said, "He said he had to test the escape pod again."

"Again?" The word caught my attention.

The man nodded solemnly while the two women checked out my backpack.

"How often does he check out the escape pod?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Every time he comes here, just about."

One of the women said, from behind me, "Sam's worried that this sunset might be unsafe."

My mind was clicking fast. I couldn't imagine any disaster that could make this sixty-square-kilometer slab of metal so unsafe that they would have to abandon it. The so-called escape pod was a modified OTV; it could fly all the way back to the Moon, if necessary.

And Sam took out the escape pod almost every time he came to this sunset.

Click. Click. Click. Those facts meshed together. They added up to something—but I didn't know the full answer. Not yet.

"Tell Sam that I'm coming out to the escape pod," I commanded. "Tell him not to leave until I get to him."

I flew up the access tube as fast as I could and pulled myself hand over hand along the guard rail that led out to the escape pod. All the while, I was thinking that the pod ought to be stationed close to the habitat module, not out at the end of the structure.

I got there almost in time. Just as I reached the docking module, the pod detached and floated away into the emptiness.

"Sam!" I yelled into my helmet microphone. "Come back here! I'm going with you."

"Sorry, Zorro, no can do," Sam's voice chirped cheerfully in

reach the slowly drifting escape pod.

Just as I did, I heard Sam warning, "Counting down to main engine ignition: ten, nine, eight . . ."

I desperately needed to reach the pod before its rocket engine lit up. Reaching awkwardly behind me, I tried to find the bleed valve for my air tank. If I could squirt a little air out, it would act as a rocket thrust and zip me out to the pod before Sam could light up its main engine.

My gloved fingers found the valve while I mentally tried to picture how it worked. I pushed down on the knob, then turned it just a hair.

Too much. I was snapped into a crazy spin, my arms and legs flailing wildly, pulled away from my body by centrifugal force. The escape pod, the sunset, the stars whirled madly around me.

I could still hear Sam counting: "... three, two, . . ."

A noiseless flash of light made me blink even while my head was whacking from side to side inside my helmet. I thought I heard Sam's voice yelling something, but then everything went blurry. I thought I was unconscious or maybe dead, but my head was still thumping painfully and every part of my body was screaming with pain and I was getting terribly dizzy.

Finally I did black out. My last thought was that this was a thoroughly idiotic way to die, spinning like a rag doll while Sam rocketed off to do whatever it was he did to clean the commodities market.

When I came to, the first thing I saw was Sam's round, freckled face staring down at me. He was smiling, sort of, even though the expression on his face was far from pleased.

"You just cost me a couple hundred million bucks, Zorro," he said. Softly.

I blinked. My head was throbbing, thundering with pain. My back and shoulders and arms and legs—all of me ached agonizingly.

But what cut through the haze of hurt was the sight of Sam. He was in his beat-up old space suit, helmet off. Something new had been added to his collection of patches and insignias. He had painted a slithering red zigzag across the suit's chest. A letter zee. The mark of Zorro.

"Wh..." My throat was dry and raw. It took a real effort to work up enough saliva to swallow. "What happened?" I asked weakly.

added up to something—but I didn't know the full answer.

my earphones. "Go on back inside and have a cup of coffee. I'll only be out for a couple hours or so. Gotta check the emergency systems."

The pod was drifting slowly away; he hadn't fired its main engine yet.

"Sam, you're full of bullshit and we both know it!"

"Such harsh language," he replied. "That's not like you, Zorro."

I had to do something. I couldn't just hover there and watch him get away with it. I don't remember thinking over my options. I simply acted without rational thought.

I unclipped my tether and jumped off the satellite, trying to

Sam tried to frown at me, but his face just wasn't cut out for it. "Just as I lit up the pod's engine you went pinwheeling past me like a bowling ball with legs."

We were in the escape pod, I realized. A padded bulkhead curved above me, and beyond Sam's back I could see the control panel and the small circular viewport above it. I was lying on one of the acceleration couches.

"You rescued me," I said.

Sam hunched his shoulders. "It was either that or watch you zip all the way out to Mars. I figured you'd run out of air in about ten minutes, the way you were squirting it out of your backpack."

I tried to sit up, but my head pounded like a thunderburst and I got woozy.

"Take it easy, babe," Sam said. "Just lay there and relax. We're on our way back to the sunset, but it'll take an hour or so."

"An hour...?"

"I had to burn a helluva lot of propellant to catch you, Zorro. And then burn off that velocity and head back. Lotta delta vec, pal. So we're on a minimum energy trajectory, headin' back to the ol' corral." Those last few words he pronounced with a fake western twang.

"You saved my life," I said, realizing that it was true. I felt an enormous sense of gratitude welling up inside me.

Sam brushed it off with a wave of his hand. "It was either that or have C.C. come after me for murder."

"She couldn't—"

"Couldn't she? Once she figured out that you knew how I was getting a jump on the market, she'd automatically assume I killed you to keep you quiet."

I blinked with shock. "But I didn't—"

"Pretty smart cookie, Zorro, ol' pal." Sam was smiling, but it seemed a little on the bitter side. "That's why I painted your zee on my chest. You got me, fair and square."

There are times when a man should keep his big mouth shut and accept praise, whether he deserves it or not. This was certainly one of those times. Unfortunately, my brain was too addled from the beating I had just undergone to pay attention to my own advice.

"What do you mean, I got you?" I asked, befuddled. "What does the zee on your chest have to do with it?"

Sam's grin turned more impish. He touched one end of the zee and said, "A factory ship." Then, sliding his finger along the zigzag red line, he added, "The Baade Orbital Telescope"—the finger slid across the other leg of the zee—"the reflector I hung out at the Mars L-5 position"—finally the finger came to rest at the other end of the zee—"and the ISC's main receiving telescope in Earth orbit."

Then he pointed to the patch on his chest, just above the zee, the one that said *Roemer*. "He figured out the speed of light."

I got it! Like a flash of lightning, I suddenly understood what Sam had been doing all along.

Everybody knew approximately when a factory ship was due

check the exact moment that the factory ship sent its signal.

Meanwhile, Sam used that ten or twenty minutes to buy metals futures before anyone else knew what the factory ship was carrying.

It was so simple! Once you understood what he was doing, it seemed absolutely obvious. And totally illegal.

"Sam," I said, still somewhat breathless with the astonishment of discovery, "you could go to jail for twenty years."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I suppose so."

A dead silence fell between us. Sam got up from the couch and floated weightlessly to the control panel. I cranked the couch up to a sitting position, grateful that my head only felt as if it was being split open by a bandsaw.

"You've been cheating the market, Sam."

He glanced back at me, over his shoulder, an elfin grin on his round face. "I don't think there's anything in the ISC rules about intercepting laser signals. I checked those rules pretty thoroughly, you know."

"Insider knowledge," I said firmly, "is a crime."

"What insider knowledge?" he asked, trying to look innocent. "I just happened to learn about the factory ships' cargos before anybody else did."

"By rigging their communications."

"Nothing illegal about that."

"Yes, there is."

"Prove it!"

"C.C. will prove it," I said. "She'll haul you up before the interplanetary tribunal and they'll send you to the penal colony on *Far-side*."

"Maybe," Sam said. I could see from the way his brow furrowed that he was actually worried.

Well, Sam knew me better than I knew myself, of course. He had already decided to stop tinkering with the market. C.C. and her minions (including me) were getting too close for comfort.

"I only did it to put together enough money to buy a couple of factory ships and go out to the asteroid belt again," he told me.

"You mean this whole scheme was just your way of raising capital?" I was incredulous.

"What else?" he asked, wide-eyed. "None of the sheepish banks would lend me a dime. C.C. blackballed me. The bigshot

"what do you mean, I got you?" I asked, befuddled.

to send its message back toward Earth, telling what kind of an ore load it was going to be carrying home. The messages are sent by tight laser beam to the ISC's receiving facility in Earth orbit. Once the satellite gets the word, it broadcasts the news to all the market centers in the Earth/Moon system.

Sam intercepted the signal. It was that simple. He positioned one of the orbiting astronomical telescopes his company maintained to intercept the laser signal, bounce it to a reflector he had prepositioned along the orbit of Mars, and then finally send it Earthward. The signal was received at the Earth satellite station ten or twenty minutes later than it normally would have been, and nobody was the wiser because nobody bothered to

investors stick with the bigtime operators, like Rockledge and Pogromy. Nobody'd loan me enough money to build an out-house, let alone a few factory ships."

I thought it over for a few moments. "So...if I didn't turn you in, you'd stop this market rigging on your own?"

"Yep," he answered immediately. "Honest Injun. Cross my heart. Scout's honor." And he held up one hand in a three-fingered Boy Scout salute.

The man *had* saved my life. I had done something foolishly stupid and he had saved me from certain death. I owed him that.

Besides, the thought of Sam in jail, or trailing away as a resi-

dent of the Farside penal colony... I couldn't bear that.

But then the image of C.C. rose in my mind, like a volcano of blubber about to erupt and spew over me. The best I could hope for was to admit I hadn't been able to find Sam's scam and let her demote me to third-rank sewer inspector or something even worse. If she ever got a hint that I had discovered Sam's trick and let him go, I'd be breaking rocks on Farside myself.

There was only one honorable thing for me to do. After getting Sam's solemn pledge that he would never, never tamper with the market again, I returned alone to Selene City and called in my resignation from the ISC.

C.C. called me back in ten seconds. I was in my spartan studio apartment, packing for my return to Earth, when the wall screen lit up. There she was, Mt. Vesuvius in the flesh, steaming and glowering at me.

"'E got to you, did 'e?" she said, without preamble.

"No," I replied, trying to shield myself as much as I could behind my garment bag. "On the contrary, I think I scared him enough so that he'll stay out of the market from now on."

"Oh, really?" she said, dripping sarcasm.

"Really," I said, with as much dignity as a man can muster while he's holding a half dozen pairs of underdrawers in his hands.

"Then it might interest you to know that one Samuel Gunn 'as just bought an entire factory ship's cargo of 'eavy metals, ten minutes before the news of the ship's successful rendezvous with nine different ore miners reached the bloody market."

Sam had broken his promise! I was stunned. Not angry, just sad that he really couldn't be trusted.

"Well," I said, "you'll have to send someone else to snoop out how he does it. I failed, and I've quit. I'm out of the game."

"You'll be out more than that, you bleedin' traitor!" For the next several minutes C.C. described at the top of her voice how she was going to blackball me and see to it that I never worked anywhere on Earth again. "Or on the Moon, for that matter," she added, with extra venom.

I was ruined and I knew it. But actually, what made me feel even worse was the knowledge that Sam had gone back on his word. He would continue to fiddle with the market until C.C. finally caught him. He couldn't get away with it forever; if I figured his scheme out (even with Sam's help) someone else could,

to a booth where I could take my messages in privacy.

The first was from someone I had never seen before. He was white-haired, with a trim beard and the tanned, leathery look of a man who had spent a good deal of his life outdoors. Yet he wore the rumpled tweeds of an academic.

"Mr. Hashimoto, this is rather a strange situation," he said into the camera. He was recording the message, not knowing where I was or when I would hear his words. "I am Hickory J. Gillett, dean of the University of New Mexico Archeology Department. We have just received a bequest of two hundred million dollars from an anonymous donor who wants us to create an endowed chair of archeology. His only requirement is that you accept the position as our first Professor of Martian Archeology."

I nearly fainted. Professor of Martian Archeology. Endowed chair. It was my dream come true.

Hardly conscious of what I was doing, I touched the keypad for my second message.

Sam Gunn's impish face grinned at me from the screen. "So I pulled off one final stunt," he said. "See you on Mars, Prof. Save one of the female students for me."

And he slashed one pointed finger through the air in the zigzag of a letter zee. □

about the author

Dr. Ben Bova started writing fiction in the late 1940s and has been at it ever since, even while pursuing careers in journalism, aerospace, education, and publishing. In his various writings he has predicted such events and technology as the space race of the 1960s, solar-powered satellites, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and virtual reality. He was a six-time Hugo Award winner during the 1970s for his work as editor of Analog.

His latest novel, Moonwar, continues the saga of the first people to live permanently on the Moon. It is the sequel to his highly acclaimed Moonrise, in which he predicted the discovery of water ice at the Moon's south pole.

The Mark of Zorro is the latest in his series of Sam Gunn stories, and marks his ninth appearance in this magazine as a fiction writer. He has also published nearly twenty nonfiction pieces in AMAZING Stories.



"what does the zee on your chest have to do with it?"

too. Sam was heading for jail, sooner or later. The thought depressed me terribly.

That was before Sam's final message reached me.

I was heading glumly out to the rocket port for the ride back to Earth and my lonely, dusty, empty apartment in Florida's sprawling Tampa-Orlando-Jacksonville industrial belt. No job and no prospects. No friends, either. Just about everyone I knew worked at the ISC. They would all shun me, fearful of C.C.'s wrath.

There were two messages waiting for me at the port's check-in counter. The clerk there—a lissome young woman whom Sam had introduced me to scarcely a week earlier—showed me

about the illustrator

John K. Snyder III's work can be seen gracing the covers of volumes 2, 4, and 6 of Harlan Ellison's Edgeworks series (volume 6, Partners in Wonder, will be released later this fall from White Wolf Books). John has worked on numerous trading cards, including pieces for such series as Star Wars Galaxy III and Rage. He is currently working towards the completion of the long awaited Doctor MidNite project for DC Comics, at which point he plans to wander aimlessly through ancient ruins, exotic lands, and abandoned megamalls.



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throughs—*Riven's* breathtaking beauty, *Tomb Raider's* swooping camera angles, the intriguing community of *Ultima Online*—we hardly remember that history is repeating itself.

Games as Film

The computer game industry is replaying the early days of moviemaking. In the 1970s computer games came from a programmer's lonely

SUPPOSE MAGAZINES WORKED LIKE COMPUTER GAMES. You'd say: "Hey, here's an overview of computer games! Wonder if I can handle it. (reading) 'Article requirements: 20/15 corrected vision with augmented color sensitivity, English 3.30 or higher, Vocabulary 97, minimum IQ 120 (140 recommended), reading speed 120 wpm (600 recommended), 244 cc free cranial capacity (560 for full comprehension).' Man, just last year I upgraded my brain, and now I'm lame!"

Computer games today push the envelope like Chuck Yeager on benzodraine. Next time you see those fearsonly high-end PC games infesting the front shelves at CompUSA or Computer City—*Datamania, Ultrag, the latest Ultima* installment, *SimWhatever*—think about it. When each game started production, maybe two years ago, the designers had to aim at a moving target: the tech level most customers would command when the game hit the market. Imagine their reasoning:

DESIGNERS: "Hmnm. Most game buyers have bought their computer in the last six months. They want a game that convinces them it was the right purchase, not some *Tetris* clone that runs on a 386 DOS fossil. All our competitors will be designing for that high end. If we aim lower, our game looks puny. If we aim high, our game will do cool stuff others can't."

And so game publishers stampede up the power curve. Enchanted by their break-

bedroom; in the early '80s, from frantic little companies with eight guys and a disk duplicator. To film historian and computer game producer Warren Spector (*System Shock, Ultima Underworld I and II, Wings of Glory*), that sounds like film in the early 1900s.

"Anyone who understood the technology of how a camera worked was making movies," says Spector, who holds a Master's degree in film studies. "The camera was the processing unit, and you had to develop your own film. There was a lot of experimentation; they hadn't agreed on the standards, like film size or even sprocket-hole size and shape. They didn't know how to deal with sound. People were making it up as they went along."

Filmmakers got lucky: Their platform stabilized. "The fundamental technology of film hasn't changed since the mid-'30s," says Spector. "There have been detail differences—ooh, widescreen, wow—but by the early '20s, people pretty much knew how sound and color would work. You can go back to *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and say, 'Okay, I see how we got to *Star Wars* from here.' But good luck hunting for *Quake's* ancestry in, say, *Zerk* (1976).

Will game technology ever stabilize? No one foresees that happy day. Yet as the computer game business grows, it's still looking more like Hollywood every year. A New York analyst firm, Access Media International, measured America's 1997 computer and home video game market at \$9 billion. That's about where American film was in 1986. Games are catching up.

As they grow, game publishers are facing the same problems film studios did. They're starting to solve them the same way—but the solutions make life hard for publishers who can't adapt.

The Mad Libs Syndrome

Remember the old party game *Mad Libs*, where the host asks guests for random words, then plugs them into a story? Over the years, every article on computer games has inevitably included some sentence like, "Soon computer games will seem more realistic than ever because of exciting new technology like [NOUN], [ACRONYM], and [JARGON]." Here, *Mad Libs*-style, are the words for this year's blanks.

DVD-ROM: Consulting firm InfoTech says this next-generation optical format should reach mainstream desktops by next year, becoming the principal software format by 2003. Game publishers are moving up to DVD as soon as possible, because a first-generation DVD holds four times as much data as a CD-ROM, and later standards should double or quadruple that.

3Dfx: The 3D accelerator card wars are over, and 3Dfx won. To see its Voodoo2 chip's beautiful



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Positional sound:
What's that behind you? Is someone creeping away to your left? Get your headphones ready for sound that puts the game's monsters right in your room.

More sophisticated AI: Action game designers have finally realized that games play better when the monsters aren't stupid. Soon adversaries will size up threats, retreat when wounded, call for reinforcements, and steal your health kits.

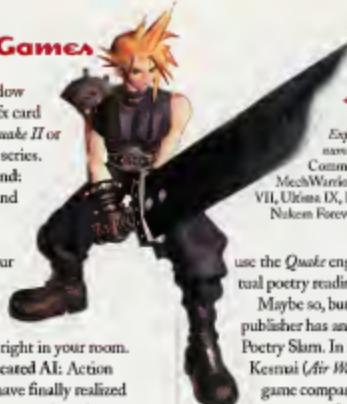
Cinematic camera angles: In *Tomb Raider* you saw heroine Lara Croft (gaming's first sex symbol) from dramatic angles as she crept through caves and ruins. Expect future third-person games to move the camera as smoothly as Alfred Hitchcock.

So far as technology is concerned, the parallels with movies are clear. Want to know what games will eventually look like? See *Toy Story*. Know what they'll sound like? Go to a Stallone movie and listen.

But what will these games play like? Better polish up your crystal ball, because no one really has a clue.

It's unlikely they'll be interactive movies, a category that produced a few good games (*Gabriel Knight II*, the third and fourth *Wing Commander* games) and way too many duds. Most successful computer games don't really resemble movies, or even stories. They're more like immersive environments, what Steven Johnson calls "digital architecture." Johnson, editor of the funky online zine *Feed* (www.feed.com), believes that though (say) *Myst* and *Riven* offered stories full of mystery, people played them primarily to explore their novel worlds.

What's more, when games reach the Internet, they need not be about violent conflict, Johnson says; they could create community instead. Networked *Quake*, for instance, "offers a perfectly good environment for people to meet in virtual reality," he says. "There's no reason you couldn't



► WHERE FANTASIES ARE NEVER FINAL
Expect plenty of Roman numerals on store shelves: *Command & Conquer II*, *MechWarrior III*, *Final Fantasy VII*, *Ultima IX*, *Interstate 77*, *Duke Nukem Forever*, and dozens more

use the *Quake* engine to stage virtual poetry readings."

Maybe so, but so far no game publisher has announced a 3D Poetry Slam. In fact, aside from *Kestrel* (*Air Warrior*), not many game companies are making money on the Internet. Eric Goldberg, president of the online gaming company Crossover Technologies (*Mad-Maze, President '96*), jokes, "We're not a smoking ruin, so by the standards of the industry we're doing well." Origin's *Ultima Online* has scored a rare success, but it's mainly for a core audience willing to live their lives online.

Design trends today point toward returns of past ideas. Look at some high-profile titles out now or coming up, almost all slight variations on established categories.

Action: Lots of these first-person shooters are standard killfests, but *Half-Life* (Valve) may draw interest for its gritty settings, good AI, and storyline by SF writer Marc Laidlaw (*Dad's Nude*, *The Neon Lotus*). Shiny Entertainment's *Mystab* casts you as Bob the cherub, just down from heaven to find the seven seals from Revelations. Ion Storm's *Daikatana*, a handsome time-travel adventure with inventory control and strong character interactions, will draw a million fans just because it's designed by John Roemer (*DOOM*, *Quake*), Interplay's *Klingon Home Guard* should sell to Trekkers. But the hottest buzz accompanies Epic Megagames' *Unreal* with its horrific monsters, breakthrough environments, and amazing on-the-fly level editor.

Strategy: Among two dozen *Command & Conquer* clones and another dozen

Warcraft copies, LucasArts has its powerhouse *Star Wars* license to distinguish its *Master of Orion* clone, *Rebelfire*. Interplay also takes the licensed route with *Star Trek: Birth of the Federation*. One offbeat imitator, Activision's *Battlezone*, superimposes a top-down radar strategy map over a first-person 3D shooter view. *Guardians: Agents of Justice* (Microprose) adapts the *X-COM* approach to superheroic battles. Bullfrog's long-awaited *Populous III* updates the venerable "god game" for real-time action. Sid Meier (*Civilization*) is working on *Alpha Centauri*, a turn-based step beyond *Civil*, at his new company Firaxis.

Simulation: Pick your era: *Red Baron II Deluxe* (Sierra), *Panzer '44* (Interactive Magic), *iF-22 Persian Gulf* (I-Magic), or *Command & Gold* (Nova Logic). Pacifists will delight to hear that Will Wright (*SimCity*) is preparing *The Sims*, in which you guide a single *SimCity* family to build the best home in their neighborhood.

Games for Bubba: The unexpected success of *Trophy Bass* and *Deer Hunter* revealed an untrapped market for trailer-park computer games played with a mouse in one hand and a beer in the other. Wizards are doing *Deer Hunter 2*, and Interplay plans *Redneck Rampage Rides Again*.

Sequels: Expect plenty of Roman numerals on store shelves: *Command & Conquer II*, *MechWarrior III*, *Final Fantasy VII*, *Ultima IX*, *Interstate 77*, *Duke Nukem Forever*, and dozens more.

Odd stuff: Only a few products ring the novelty bell. Haptex's *Virtual Friend* lets you converse with a startlingly realistic alien, who speaks responses aloud when you type in text messages. *Saneatum* (Digital Addiction) is a new "virtual trading card game" like *Chom X* or the online "ManaLink" version of *Magic: The Gathering*. From Nicholson New York, *History of Glamour* tells a quirky farm-girl-turned-rock-star story that helps adolescent girls forge their own identities.

Sounds conservative, doesn't it? You'd expect more companies to try something new—because, as in early Hollywood, no one knows what not to do.

"Try something new?" Not in today's market.



► BUT WOULD YOU WANT TO LIVE THERE?
Although *Myst* and *Riven* offered stories full of mystery, people played them primarily to explore their novel worlds.



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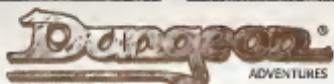
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Electro Games

The Business End

Gamers don't often care about business details, but it determines what games they can buy, where, and when. Look at some of the factors currently shaping the market.

Development costs:

Today a publishable game keeps at least one designer, three programmers, and a whole team of artists busy for upwards of a year or two. Hardware costs, overhead, all those cans of Jolt cola... You can't buy in for under \$1.5 million. Origin's *Wing Commander IV* cost \$14 million. Many companies can't afford the publishing business. Now they're studios, development houses, for a few metastasizing survivors.

Vaporware: As you read this, *Falcom 4.0* shipped yet? If it's late (again), it has plenty of company. Bullfrog's *Populus III* is, at this writing, one year late. Blizzard's *Starcraft* finally arrived in April, about 18 months behind schedule. Late ship dates have become a painfully routine joke in the industry. Even so, *Falcom 4* is pushing it. In 1993 Microprose planned to release the game on floppies; *Falcom* supposedly hits this spring on DVD, having missed the intervening CD-ROM era.

Games slip for lots of reasons. A complicated design has a lot of bugs; some new tech arrives, and adapting always takes longer than the developer thinks; publishers take forever to review a developer's game in progress. Still, Stephen Boeman, vice president of the Illusion Machines development group in Austin, Texas, notes, "At some point you have to say, 'This is inexcusable.' You have to ship a game." In hitting 15 monthly production milestones for its recent real-time strategy game *Dawn of War*, Illusion Machines lost a grand total of two days.

Why don't publishers wait until the game is done before announcing it? Because by the time you ramp up your publicity, technology has passed you by.

Payola: Once you've spent millions developing the game, you pay through the nose to get it on the shelves. Prepare to spend 10-15% of your likely revenues on legalized bribes—"shelving fees"—for a



▲ Is It For Real?
The virtual trading card game *Cirrus X* rings the novelty bell.

mouth of shelf space in the big chain stores. If you don't pay, your customers won't get to play. Lots of good games aren't selling today, because they can't get displayed. (By the way, the same systematic extortion prevails everywhere in chain retailing.)

Fear: "There's lots of chaos out there, a lot of uncertainty," says Beeman. "Publishers get anxious at the idea of a million-dollar budget. Their catchphrase is 'revolutionary, not evolutionary,' but if you pitch them a revolutionary game, they have no incentive to decide. If they decide and they're wrong, they're fired. If they're right, the rewards aren't big enough to justify the risk. If they don't decide, they look prudent."

Bob Jacob, a self-described "failed developer" who has left game production after a 14-year career at Cicanware and Acme/Malibis Interactive, expresses similar frustration. "The environment militates against innovation. Most concepts come out of the publisher's group, and they assign the concept to a developer. The developer is really selling production capacity; the odds of selling an original concept are very small. Not a publisher I know of would have funded *DOOM*."

Publishers are not only reluctant to fund, they're eager to cancel. Though the prerelease fatality rate in computer games doesn't approach the movie industry's 99.9%, well over half the projects that game companies initiate never hit the shelves, even after years of development. Some big-time talents have worked in computer games for years—any company would hire them on four hours' notice—but through no fault of their own, they've never actually shipped a game. Over time, these people can become tense and jumpy.

It's one more weird symptom of the game industry's headlong pace, its cut-throat competition, and its screwy structure. Hundreds, even thousands of games actually do ship each year, but almost all of them, products of one or two (or more!) years' work by dozens of talented people, die ignominious deaths of neglect. Some-

thing has to change. Everyone keeps hoping, or fearing, it'll change soon.

Ways Out?

Possible solutions come from...the film industry.

Warren Spector continues his comparison between computer games today and the early days of moviemaking: "We're still consolidating. Call it the 1920s, when the big studios controlled the mechanism of filmmaking. But inevitably the people who are making games are going to take over. Eventually somebody will figure out, 'Hey, without me they're nothing.' If g.o.d. gets funding, that would knock 20 years off movie history right there."

"G.o.d." is the audacious abbreviation for Mike Wilson's proposed Gathering of Developers. Wilson, former marketing chief at id Software, wants to create (in the words of g.o.d.'s mission statement at www.godgames.com) "a banding of outstanding development teams publishing their titles through the company.... G.o.d. is the 'joint venture' of the development industry, a role that other publishers could never fill." Crazy? Hardly. In movies, the directors and stars control their projects. Why not in computer games too?

The difference is, film people have had seven or eight decades to clean up their act. They make deals with a handshake, show up on time, work horrendous hours, and finish the job on schedule—or they don't get another. Reliable filmmakers get funding through "completion bond financing," where a bank or bond company guarantees their deadlines and thereby reduces a studio's anxiety. The same completion-bond idea could help smooth relations between game developers and publishers—if the developers start acting like professionals and meeting deadlines.

Okay, computer games don't work quite like movies. Even low-budget indie filmmakers enjoy a fundamentally stable platform; game developers, given their crazily soaring technology, are forced to surf. But every creator, in every medium, must cultivate discipline. If you have to surf, then surf rigorously.

As the gaming market grows and matures, its rules are changing. Creators who aim to win can learn a big lesson from film, an older and larger game: Shape up, or you lose. ▲

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Light Show

ONE OF THE EARLIEST and most recognizable images from science fiction cinema is the bullet-shaped rocket from Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* poking the startled lunar orb in the eye. Many devotees of written science fiction would note that SF films continue that sort of assault to this day—only on a significantly different target.

In the climate-controlled darkness of a modern multiplex cinema, a big-budget "sci fi" epic lulls an audience into a stupor. The film's apocalyptic landscape is populated by fast-talking heroes with no substantial thoughts, but a great repertoire of one-liners, all suitable for use in thirty-second TV spots. A sudden rumble of Dolby thunder interrupts one such quip and jolts the sluggish viewers partially awake. Myriad half-lidded eyes, all granted a clear view of the screen by stadium seating, open just a bit wider. They're ready to receive the rocket.

Frantic, hyperedited bursts

of light slam into those eyes at twenty-four frames per second. A flash of lightning reveals a genetically resurrected Tyrannosaurus towering over a Jeep. Snapshots beamed straight from hell assault trespassers aboard a possessed deep-space exploration ship. Another ship, this one carrying a family lost in space, hurtles through the core of an imploding planet. An overwhelming alien craft reduces the White House to matchsticks with a single, monstrous energy beam.

Memorable images all, and like Méliès's rocket, they lodge in the eye. But they never quite reach the mind.



▲ DUNSEN, WILL ROBINSON. The cast of *Lost in Space* casts its eye to train in space.



but endures, thanks in part to the Hollywood practice of spinning sequels from anything that's a hit—especially genre flicks. That urge to generate brand names has only been strengthened by the growth of media giants such as Time-Warner and Disney, which now boast in-house divisions to create and market books, soundtracks, action figures, and anything else to be derived from a successful movie or, better still, movie series.

And the constraints placed upon creatives involved in franchise films—limits on characters, on defining or redefining the established mythos, and so on—often result in products that are dreary and predictable. A screenwriter can't kill or even substantially alter the dashing series lead of the Galactic Battles epics, Commander Blastoff, if the parent company has his image plastered all over a city-sized warehouse of lunchboxes and board games they're trying to hawk to Toys "R" Us. Still, there's got to be a new series entry every couple of years, or the brand will go stale. The mind-numbing results? *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*; *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*; *Batman & Robin*; *Last in Space*...

That last example is something of the odd man out in the list; it's not a failed sequel, but a cynical attempt at creating a modern movie franchise. *Last in Space* comes across less as a coherent film than three TV episodes awkwardly spliced together. Any updating of the characters is purely superficial, leaving a talented cast without much to do but recite catchphrases that were tired in the 1960s. The new

Robinson family becomes dysfunctional in a Ricki Lake Show sort of way—lots of low-key hostility, but few genuine emotions and no conflict that isn't resolved by the most insincere group hug. Sure, Gary Oldman manages some nice riffs on Jonathan Harris's original portrayal of Dr. Smith, but the Robinson women are superfluous to the story, playing almost no role in the film's entire third act.

The director of *Lost in Space*,

Stephen Hopkins, is no stranger to franchise

films, having helmed both the forgettable *Predator 2* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street 5: The Dream Child*. He points the story away from the human characters, spending the screen time instead on the *Jupiter II* launching, landing, and zooming past various computer-generated perils. Considering the weak dialogue those characters spout, courtesy of a tedious script by *Batman & Robin* scribe Akiva Goldsman, that lack of attention could be considered something of a gift to the audience. Yet the model effects dip more than once to the clumsiness of the Gerry Anderson "Supermarionation" TV series *Thunderbirds* or *Captain Scarlet*. And the film ends with such a blatant lack of dramatic closure that you almost expect title cards to announce next week's installment.

The box office success of *Lost in Space* pretty much guarantees that a next installment will be made. That very commercial achievement also highlights the fact that audiences often reward film makers for flashy, but formulaic, science fiction wares. In fact, they pressure producers,

directors, and writers to keep franchise characters and situations safe and predictable.

Consider the preemptive fan reaction to Tri-Star's *Godzilla*. Months before the movie's release, the comments posted on the Internet in discussion groups such as alt.movies.monster were bitterly negative. The reason? Rumor had it that Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich had redesigned the King of the Monsters.

Godzilla into another forgettable but commercially successful product. And too many fast food joint tie-ins and toy licenses had been attached to the project for it to stray far from bland, marketable territory, even if the film makers had been inclined to do something unpredictable.

So this particular audience all but announced its willingness to open its eyes wide for any cinematic SCUD, so long

Trek films are quite enjoyable, as is *The Empire Strikes Back*. And the world of science fiction cinema would be much diminished had a single outing been all that was afforded author/screenwriter Nigel Kneale's Professor Bernard Quatermass. Whereas most effective entries from film series work because they forge a new perspective on the franchise characters and concepts, the *Quatermass* movies succeeded time and again by leaving the central character a still point around which astonishing

new ideas and amazing events swirl with cyclonic force. (If you have yet to enjoy the third entry in that series, *Quatermass and the Pit*, dash right out to the local video store; Anchor Bay recently released it in letterboxed VHS format as part of its bargain-priced Hammer Collection.)

It's easy, too, to cite any number of stand-alone films that offer even more flash and thunder, even less content, than the least creative franchise entry. The aforementioned team of Devlin and Emmerich lured audiences to their wildly popular summer blockbuster *Independence Day* with exciting trailers and saturation marketing.

Sadly, those promotional blips revealed everything worthwhile about the movie. The plot of *ID4* could be adequately summarized in a few seconds, leaving more than enough time in a commercial to offer up all the best explosions and sarcastic comments.

So it's not quite fair, or accurate, to lay the blame for the relatively poor state of SF cinema at the securely trade-

Too many fast food joint tie-ins and toy licenses had been attached to the project for it to stray far from bland, marketable territory.



▲ GO, GO, GODZILLA. Even such minor details as the configuration of Godzilla's spines were cause for consternation and debate.

The movie's content didn't seem to matter to these very vocal *Godzilla* addicts. The appearance of the giant radioactive lizard did.

The film was declared a boondoggle by these hardcore *kaiju* fans simply because it might stray from the templates utilized in the old Toho flicks. Even such minor details as the configuration of Godzilla's spines were cause for consternation and debate. Most preemptive critics seemed to miss the actual cause for concern: With their track record for noisy, utterly empty "sci fi" flicks such as *Starship*, Devlin and Emmerich were likely to turn

as it roared in a familiar way and had the correct fins.

As I said, brand-name films are easy scapegoats for the sins of SF cinema. Too easy.

Merely being part of a franchise is not the final word on a film's quality, any more than being classified as science fiction disqualifies a book as serious literature.

The suits at Twentieth Century Fox possessed foresight enough to let James Cameron turn the one-off monster from "Old Dark Ship" horror-SF flick *Alien* into a slathering army for the adventure-SF epic *Aliens*. The second and fourth *Star*

Silver Screen

marked feet of brand-name films. In fact, it may not be all that accurate to claim the late 1990s as a particularly low point for science fiction moviemaking.

Good SF movies are being made, both outside and inside franchises. *Contact*, based on the novel by Carl Sagan, offers intelligent, discussion-provoking speculation upon the nature of science, religion, and the possibilities of extraterrestrial life. Despite an unconvincing romantic pairing with Matthew McConaughey, Jodie Foster provides another in a long string of thoughtful performances as the film's lead, one matched by most of the superb supporting cast—particularly Tom Skerritt as her claim-stealing boss and John Hurt as an oddball billionaire.

More intriguing still is *Dark City*, the sophomore effort by director Alex Proyas.



▲ DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK. Director Proyas calls into question the very nature of reality.

Dark City manages to wow audiences with both its grim, surrealistic visual style and the sophistication of its storyline, which blends SF and film noir in surprising ways. In interviews about the film, Proyas is quick to point out

that science fiction has been used for all the wrong reasons by movie makers: "In literature," Proyas notes, "science fiction has always been a genre for ideas that can alter your perspective on things; in film it's almost never used for that—it's used to have big spaceships blow up cities. I think we're a little tired of that."

A little reading on the Internet or in film magazines that cover more than star vehicles and block-busters will reveal a whole body of import SF films, particularly from Japan, that deserve your attention. The astounding anime series *New Genesis Evangelion* single-handedly revitalized the giant robot subgenre and has spawned a multimillion dollar licensing boom in Japan. The series boasts complex characters, a weighty religious subtext, and a storytelling style that owes a surprising amount to the quiet, visually spare technique of master Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. The individual episodes from the *Evangelion* TV series have seen release in the United States, two per sixty-minute tape, through A.D. Vision. The two *Evangelion* films should soon follow, though a U.S. distributor has yet to be announced.

Stylistically opposite *Evangelion*, and almost as compelling, is the Japanese live action film *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer*. Recently brought to the States in an uncut director's edition by Manga Entertainment, *Tetsuo II* offers a disturbing and hyperkinetic vision of mankind literally dehumanized by technology and vio-

lence. When his son is kidnapped by thugs, a Tokyo businessman undergoes a cyborg transformation that leaves him a walking arsenal. Along with the film's relentless pacing and brutal

◀ **ANIME ME THIS**
astounding anime series *New Genesis Evangelion* single-handedly revitalized the giant robot subgenre and has spawned a multimillion dollar licensing boom in Japan.



acts of cruelty, writer-producer-director Shinya Tsukamoto challenges his audience with eerily sexualized machinery and moments reminiscent of David Lynch's most unsettling work.

This sudden wealth of imported science fiction cinema bodes well for the genre. Just as the influx of directors and stars from Hong Kong kick-started the Hollywood action-adventure film, these animators and directors are likely to end up creating—or, at the very least, influencing—a new crop of American SF films.

And many of the most talented English-language directors still gravitate toward science fiction, which isn't a surprise at all. The genre affords them a near-limitless canvas upon which to paint their stories.

The coming year should see the release of *Matrix*. Directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski—whose energetic and impressive crime thriller, *Bound*, garnered serious critical praise in 1996—*Matrix* tells the story of a man who comes to believe that he has been wired against his will into a computer and that our everyday world is nothing

but a complex fantasy inside a digital matrix. The reported presence of Keanu Reeves on the cast is enough to make one pause, but supporting actors Laurence Fishburne and Joe Pantoliano could still hold things together.

Late 1998 should also bring *eXistenZ* from David Cronenberg. The film will return Cronenberg to themes he has touched upon in such classics as *Videodrome*: In a futuristic world where virtual reality game designers are treated like rock stars, someone has devised a game that blurs the distinctions between the real and the imagined. This topic has been largely abandoned to such low-budget, direct-to-video projects as *Arachnoid*, so it'll be interesting to see what the director of such troubling movies as *Dead Ringers* and *The Fly* mines from it.

In the end, moviegoers blinded to the potential of SF films by all those cleverly crafted but empty block-busters may miss out on superior releases such as *eXistenZ* or *Tetsuo II: Body Hammer* or *Dark City*. Yet this phenomenon occurs with all types of films, not just science fiction. How many people saw the brilliant documentary *fire, water & out of control* or the wonderfully subversive *Boogie Nights* compared to the throngs that lined up time after time to watch an unlikely romance unfold aboard a ship they knew was going to sink? But for those who know where to look, there are more than enough cinematic rockets intended to direct our gaze toward the stars, rather than confound it with a clever light show into seeing stars where there are none. ▲

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If you've ever stood on the threshold of greatness only to be yanked off the stage, you'll be able to relate to poor Pasquatz. Drum roll, please...

BY

MALCOLM
BECKETT

DIDDLE-AH.

Diddle ah ah. Da-da-da-DAT?

Pasquatz sang the rhythms of the land, and then slid seaward, following the flying things of his creation. He was a sometime thing, fading in and out with the intensity of the patterns, making of himself a visual counterpoint to the rhythms of his voice-drum.

PAH-papapapa(pit-pit-pittapittata-pitatatata-PIT)papa-PAH! Now another voice, and Pasquatz is flying, feet and horny, air-grasping hands shooting out in whatever directions his voice has left untraveled; giant, bulbous head tipped backward, seemingly with the force of the voices he was pushing out. Pasquatz made the sound or the sound made Pasquatz; who knew; who cared? Pasquatz had made three voices last time; now he would try for four, and the assembled devotees leaned forward when he hit the roll that was the approach.

He would keep first roll and then beat with his bassest voice and climb above it with the next, staccato; then throw in the third, battering the first two aside and down, and finally solo with that. Somewhere in the middle, if he were good and if he were lucky, tonight, he would kick in a fourth—and Pasquatz the drummerman would go down in history as the greatest musician of his time. As well as take the Class, the Competition, the Event, and the whole damned Contestation. He was primed and ready, and he knew it, and everyone who was within a thousand meters of him knew it, too.

He was sore, now. The sounds were coming from the big, paddle-shaped *pawpaw*-flap that racketed up and down to make the air flow either to his saclike lungs or to his gills, depending where he was, and that, mighty ribbed muscle though it was, waxed and waned and wore and got sore; he was weary.

But he was ready, and the crowd knew it almost as well as he. He had been practicing in the watery way of the showplace for many months, and now he was ready.

1-voice rolled a fast, hard intro, then made the feather-on-soot brushing, *p-taahbab*, *p-taahbab*, *p-taahbab*, *p-taahbab* in the back, and he flipped the side of his *paws*, and opened it with a ridge-ripple in the middle, and *flap-flap-flap-flap*, threw the air past it in measured 2-voice rhythm—*baaum-ba-aa-ba-aa-baum-ba-aa-BOOM-BA-DA-BOOM*, and then again and over and over, throwing in touches and flairs he never

dreamed of, and making the floor he danced shake with the fury of his drumming feet (which, although he was the best footer in the west, did not count). Now Pasquatz was *all* drum; this was the moment when he had triumphed last time...

3-voice. Softer and higher, softer and lower; he was 3-voicing along, now, *pititit-ab-tha-tataababab-pititit-ab-tha-tataababab*...

Three voices he made for quite a while, and the boom and the flap and feathers all went snap, leading the ear and the mind down a garden path that grew Pasquatzes green and grinning, multiples of him and his great, flapping *pawpaw*-flap...

He turned, now, and faced the room, mouth as wide as a *LiLi* mouth will widen, teeth gleaming scarlet in the white stage-light. Pasquatz nodded minutely toward the side of the stage, and Pasquatz-Helper dimmed the house-lights, softened the key...

All alone, he stood in a pool of purple, self and music one, stage reverberating to the mighty swamp-noise that filled first Pasquatz, and then it, and then our and filled up the room and the minds it contained...

Opened even wider—wider than a Pasquatz could, and readied the high-top ticking of the slow-mouse *pit-at*; *pit-at*; *pit-at*; *pit-at*... that would be the first 4-voice ever sung, not just on the stage, but on the entire damn planet, and

Out onto the stage she walked, naked and old. Walked; sashayed, another race would say, and right up to Pasquatz, beating his flesh out for the world to hear and the audience to see—for he was *broadcasting* this!

And, low and quiet, sibilant and womanly: "Drumming's over. I just came to tell ye," she said, and looked at her watch, and turned about to go away, off the stage and back into life.

Pasquatz screamed. He roared and he screamed again with the pain of abandonment, and the pain of not-to-be-heard-again. He stamped a meter of stage into flinders, screaming out the outrage she had brought with her to visit upon him....

But the drumming stopped.

Ghost-beats swung among the rafters, *panting* out the beat he had begun, but nothing—*nothing*—came from Pasquatz; nothing at all. Nothing but the agony of a silent, shocked wail in the eyes, which he turned, not after the woman, but toward the audience, who had gasped....

pasquatz

ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF MIRACOLA

boom-ba-ta-boom-ba-ta-boom-ba-ta-boom-ba-ta-boom boom boom-ba-

There is a thing that great drumming does when it stops. The silence it leaves behind is a full one. The ghost-sounds of his next-to-triumph, of the 4-voice that never was, followed Pasquito to the edge of the stage and over; leapt with him when his big-webbed feet hit the lower floor, shuddered in the gnashing of his blood-rent teeth when he walked, flat-footed and silent-minded, to the great door of the auditorium.

The audience turned away as a single being, knowing they had almost witnessed history. Knowing, too, that this woman was the She-Who-Tells of the family of Pasquatz, and that the drumming, Pasquatz's perfect drumming, was over. Pasquatz had been called off the stage.

At the door, he did not pause. Reached and opened it with a dead hand and walked from that place into the mud street, and walked and walked and walked . . . until the city and the stage and the audience and the drums were far, far behind. He walked the night away and half the next day; he was a dutiful *Liszt*, and when he moved slowly into evening again, he came upon his own village, slumbering already in the mist that rose gentle over the *dige-trees* and the swamp. His great paddle-feet churned the bottom-muck, now, freeing food for the tads and imagoes to eat during the night, if they saw fit. Once—ironically painful, considering what it had been about to do—the mighty *www-flap* flapped shut against the lungs of the city, and his gills beat with the heat that he had almost left behind.

There is no word in *Lim* for depression. This is because depression is a simple state of being; it did not matter to the job he had to do now or to anyone else of the village if he were as depressed as the dead log in the middle of their lagoon, that stank so *old* that the tads called it *grandfather*....

Pasquatz slumped from the perfumed waterway (*panz-snap*) out onto the flowered slab that held the houses, and wet-slapped his way to the home he had made, long ago. The woman who was his stood, waiting in the doorway, for him to—

Pasquats opened his giant mouth, and eighteen embryos leapt from the safety of their mother's throat into his, guided by the smell of the perfumed water he had just swallowed.

I greet you, he hissed, and I greet you, she said....

"It was time," she said, defensively.

Pasquitz nodded gingerly, so as not to swallow and digest his own young. He heard them slapping and sloshing and smacking within, as young will do, and nodded again, that they were happy and he had not come too late.

"You would have died," she said.

He nodded. Yes, he would have died.

The drum in his head beat out that dying had been his thing to do, that day, but he said nothing; only tramped down to the waterway, and opened his mouth to let his young play predator-and-baby among the floating perfume-flowers and the slithering live-weeds of the stream. Quietly, through the night, he watched over his babes, and then when morning came, opened again the great mouth, and took them within, and went inside to sleep.

As he slept, slowly and firmly, the *pann-flap* of Pasquatz sealed over the great gill-tube that ran beside the one to the bangs, and Pasquatz-drummer was no more.

In the morning, Pasquatz-who-was took the new name *Panatiji*, which means *Three-Voice*, and gradually, month after month, the woman-of-Panatiji and She-Who-Tells relaxed and knew that Pasquitz, drummer, was forgotten under the labor of love of the raising of the tads to imago, and then their release into the inner waterway, where the perfume *bbawp* grows, as well.

One day in the sixday following the feast of mid-summer, Panatjii and his woman took the back path to the inner waterway, and together released the images of their kind to play and learn in the outer waterway and the depths of the Great Inland Sea.

IT IS SAID, NOW, that in the City there are 5-voice drummers. It is said that in the City there is a 5-voice who grows a 6th. It is said that the 6-voice will sing at the Contestation of Summer, and that that 6-voice was once the *imago* of the great near-4-voice, Pasquatz. And it is said that, in the time when he was tad and sooner, his father did something; mighty *paex* was changed by the tears of his father; that great Pasquatz had made for his *imago* a new way to be a drummer...ridges and rills and...

WHEN SHE-WHO-TELLS came to Panatiji's house to tell him that she was leaving for the City to save the life of *Pisauñil*, Panatiji rose up silent as night, and took the purple perfume-harvester from off the wall, and swung one time, and struck Her-Who-Tells hard in the head, and splashed through the tough bone and sinew of her skull, and left her killed on the floor of his house. And then he went away.

And this was the 4th voice of Pascuatz, who is dead.



About the author

Malcolm (Mac) Beckett was born in Montreal in 1942, at the height of the war, but paid no attention to the whole affair until VE Day, when the lights came back on. He became a clinical psychologist in 1965, married in 1966, and has been writing fiction and poetry full-time since 1992. In his spare time, he is an Executive Sjyap of CampaSjyap's Authors Forum. Pasquatz is his eighth published story and his second appearance in AMAZING Stories.

About the Illustrator

Jeff Miracola is a 26-year-old self-taught painter, avid lover of science fiction and fantasy art, and master of the mighty mojo. He has been working as a freelance illustrator for the past five years. Miracola currently lives in Austin, Texas with his lovely wife and daughter.





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